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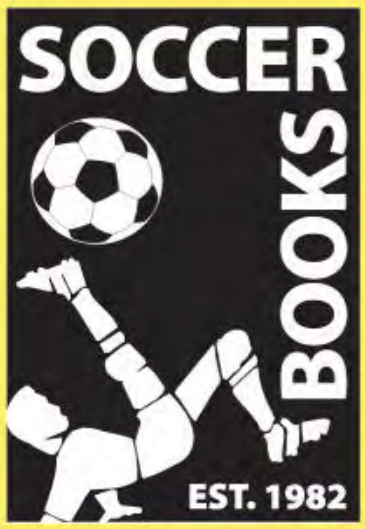

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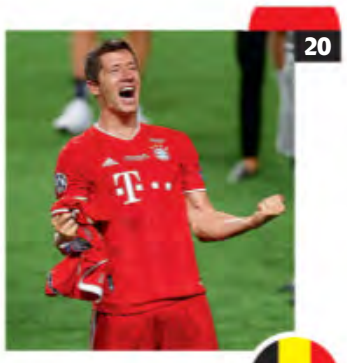

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In Pictures

The global game caught on camera

France...Paris Saint-Germain v Marseille descends into farce, with five red cards shown in injury time

Argentina...Supporters gather outside the Marcelo Bielsa stadium, home of Newell's Old Boys, requesting Lionel Messi's return to his boyhood club

Netherlands...Italy midfielder Nicolo Zaniolo attempts to score an acrobatic bicycle kick at the Johan Cruyff Arena in Amsterdam

Spain...Wolfsburg forward Pauline Bremer holds her head as Lyon celebrate winning the Women's Champions League final

Spain...Meanwhile back in Barcelona, Messi returns to training after his dispute with the club is resolved

France...Police clash with Paris Saint-Germain supporters after the French side's Champions League final defeat to Bayern Munich

Sweden...Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates scoring a landmark 100th international goal for Portugal, the first European male to reach the milestone

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FROM THE ASSISTANT EDITOR

"If you look at that schedule, it isn't showing any care for players' physical welfare."

It is difficult to disagree with Tottenham defender Eric Dier. To say that games are coming thick and fast this season is an understatement, as football attempts to recover from the impact of COVID by squeezing in as many matches as possible. As Keir Radnedge points out on page 14, the players need protecting.

The games keep on coming though, and we've tried to keep across all the major ones in the coming weeks.

Starting with the Champions League. In the first of two issues previewing the 2020-21 edition, Nick Bidwell picks out the players that could make a name for themselves in this season's competition (page 32), and poses ten questions lingering over the teams (page 42).

There is more international action too, with the Euro 2020 play-offs (page 72) and World Cup 2022 qualifying updates from Asia, Africa, South America and CONCACAF (page 80).

If there is a theme to this issue, it is talent

Of course, what happens on the pitch is just a sideshow to what *really* matters in modern football: the transfer window. As well as our usual round-up of the ins and outs from around the world (page 18), we've picked out the 30 moves that have caught our eye this summer (page 58), and taken a closer look into the move that didn't happen: Leo Messi's failed attempt to leave Barcelona. Sid Lowe explains how the saga played out on page 54.

Overall, if there is a theme to this issue, it is talent; from picking out the exciting youngsters heading to the top (Chris Richards, page 62), to revealing how the older established stars got there (Robert Lewandowski, page 20; Blaise Matuidi, page 46). We hope you enjoy.

Jamie Evans, Assistant Editor

ITALY

Golden Boy shortlist

The final 40 contenders for the Golden Boy award, a prize for Europe's best young footballer, have been revealed.

Voted for by a panel of European sports publications, the shortlist for the award is essentially a who's who of the continent's best young talent, with previous winners including Wayne Rooney, Lionel Messi, Paul Pogba and Kylian Mbappe. The final 40 for 2020 are:

Champions League winner...Alphonso Davies

"The only regret I have is not hitting that a*****e in the face. VAR catching my "aggression" is easy… Now I want to see the image of the racist"

Neymar's outburst on *Twitter* after receiving alleged racist abuse

Favourites…Dortmund's Jadon Sancho and Erling Haaland

	PLAYER	CLUB	POSITION
	Marco CARNESECCHI	Atalanta/Trapani (ITA)	Goalkeeper
	Alphonso DAVIES	Bayern Munich (GER)	Defender
	Sergino DEST	Ajax (NED)	Defender
	Michal KARBOWNIK	Legia Warsaw (POL)	Defender
	Mitchel BAKKER	Paris Saint-Germain (FRA)	Defender
	Benoit BADIASHILE	Monaco (FRA)	Defender
	Tanguy NIANZOU	Bayern Munich (GER)	Defender
	Tomas ESTEVES	Porto (POR)	Defender
	Tomas TAVARES	Benfica (POR)	Defender
	Ozan KABAK	Schalke (GER)	Defender
	Neco WILLIAMS	Liverpool (ENG)	Defender
	Ryan GRAVENBERCH	Ajax (NED)	Midfielder
	Mohamed IHATTAREN	PSV (NED)	Midfielder
	MARCOS ANTONIO	Shakhtar Donetsk (UKR)	Midfielder
	Callum HUDSON-ODOI	Chelsea (ENG)	Midfielder
	Bukayo SAKA	Arsenal (ENG)	Midfielder
	Phil FODEN	Manchester City (ENG)	Midfielder
	Adil AOUCHICHE	Saint-Etienne (FRA)	Midfielder
	Eduardo CAMAVINGA	Rennes (FRA)	Midfielder
	Dominik SZOBOSZLAI	Red Bull Salzburg (AUT)	Midfielder
	Sandro TONALI	Milan (ITA)	Midfielder
	Dejan KULUSEVSKI	Juventus (ITA)	Midfielder
	Jonathan DAVID	Lille (FRA)	Forward
	Amine GOUIRI	Nice (FRA)	Forward
	Vladyslav SUPRIAHA	Dynamo Kiev (UKR)	Forward
	Marley AKE	Marseille (FRA)	Forward
	Myron BOADU	AZ (NED)	Forward
	Dennis BORKOWSKI	RB Leipzig (GER)	Forward
	Christos TZOLIS	PAOK (GRE)	Forward
	Mason GREENWOOD	Manchester United (ENG)	Forward
	Sebastiano ESPOSITO	Internazionale (ITA)	Forward
	RODRYGO	Real Madrid (ESP)	Forward
	Jadon SANCHO	Borussia Dortmund (GER)	Forward
	Erling HAALAND	Borussia Dortmund (GER)	Forward
	VINICIUS JR.	Real Madrid (ESP)	Forward
	Rayan CHERKI	Lyon (FRA)	Forward
	Ansu FATI	Barcelona (ESP)	Forward
	Fabio SILVA	Wolves (ENG)	Forward
	Rafael CAMACHO	Sporting (POR)	Forward
	Ferran TORRES	Manchester City (ENG)	Forward

HEROES & VILLAINS

Wonderkid…Ansu Fati

ANSU FATI

A year after becoming the youngest goalscorer in Barcelona's history, the 17-year-old winger did the same for Spain. Fati made his international debut in a 1-1 draw with Germany, then three days later scored against Ukraine – breaking the 95-year-old record held by Juan Errazquin.

VICTOR LINDELOF

The Manchester United defender has been praised by Swedish police for catching a thief who robbed an elderly woman. According to reports, Lindelof witnessed a man snatch an elderly woman's handbag, then pursued him, caught him, and held onto him until the police arrived.

VEDAD IBISEVIC

After moving from Hertha Berlin to Schalke, the veteran striker has pledged to donate his salary to charity. The Bosnian striker said: "I'm not here to earn money, but to play in the Bundesliga. My basic salary will be donated to charity. I will only play for bonuses."

HECTOR BELLERIN

The Arsenal defender has demonstrated his commitment to environmental causes by becoming the second-largest shareholder of Forest Green Rovers – the most environmentally-friendly club in the world. The League Two side are fully vegan, and have plans to build a new wooden stadium.

HILTON

The Montpellier defender should have been in the "Heroes" category after becoming the first 43-year-old to play in Ligue 1 for over 60 years, but tarnished that record by being sent off. In doing so, Hilton became the 14th player to be red-carded in the first three weeks of the French season.

PSG SUPPORTERS

French police made over 150 arrests in Paris following the Champions League final, as Paris Saint-Germain fans broke out into violence. More than 5,000 people gathered at the *Champs-Elysees* to watch the game, but after the defeat vehicles were set on fire, windows broken and shops vandalised.

GIANNI INFANTINO

In spite of the fact that he is still being investigated by Swiss authorities, FIFA's Ethics Committee has cleared its president of any alleged breaches. Infantino's relationship with Swiss Attorney-General Michael Lauber is under investigation.

TONI LEISTNER

On his return to former club Dynamo Dresden, and on the receiving end of a 4-1 loss, the Hamburg defender launched himself into the crowd to confront a group of fans. "I was verbally abused from the stands. I can usually cope with it. But this was extremely and massively below the belt, against my family," he wrote on *Instagram*.

Seeing red…Toni Leistner

"I got some stick from the fans and I woke up and I was raging. After training I planned to go and speak to Dean Smith about things, but then I went and headbutted Jota."

Chelsea midfielder Danny Drinkwater opens up to *The Telegraph* about his loan spell at Aston Villa

Darwin NUNEZ

(Benfica)

It has been a busy summer for Benfica. By signing Nunez for €24 million, the Eagles have broken the Portuguese transfer record and taken their total summer spending to almost €80m. This year, they have been responsible for three of the most expensive transfers in Portuguese history, with Nunez joining Everton Soares and Julian Weigl at the Estadio da Luz.

So highly rated is the Uruguay striker, they have inserted a €100m release clause into his contract. He has only been in Europe for a year, joining Almeria from Penarol in 2019, but made a good impression with 16 goals in the Spanish Segunda Division.

His form earned him an international call-up, and after scoring on his debut against Peru, there are high hopes for him. Standing at 6ft 2ins, he is more Cavani than Suarez, thriving on good service into the box and a real handful for defenders. He will be a huge boost to Benfica's hopes of regaining the title.

Record-breaker... Darwin Nunez

Spectacular...Irvin Cardona

NDUBUISI EGBO
(Tirana)
The ex-Nigeria goalkeeper, now Tirana coach, has become the first African manager to win a European title.

MBUNYA ALEMANJI
(Roma)
Roma snapped up the 16-year-old from Cambridge United based on video clips.

IRVIN CARDONA
(Brest)
It is impossible to do justice to Cardona's acrobatic volley against Dijon with words alone. Just type his name into YouTube.

JUDE BELLINGHAM
(Borussia Dortmund)
The 17-year-old became England U21's youngest debutant and goalscorer, then bagged again on his Dortmund debut.

EDDIE NKETIAH
(Arsenal)
In the same England Under-21 game, Nketiah scored a ten-minute hat-trick.

MARCUS McGUANE
(Oxford United)
Barcelona's first Englishman since Gary Lineker has returned home – joining Oxford on loan from Nottingham Forest.

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Magic moments define the biggest games – not tactics

I happened to see the Champions League final on television in Italy, where the programme covering the match was called *"Pressing"*.

It is the buzzword of modern football, the tactical style preferred by men like Hansi Flick and Jurgen Klopp.

As soon as the match had finished, the conversation among pundits was insistent: are we now in a period of domination by German coaches?

Flick and Klopp, victorious in the last two finals; Thomas Tuchel, this year's runner-up; Julian Nagelsmann, coach of semi-finalists RB Leipzig.

It is a seductive thought. Among pundits, coaches, aficionados and ordinary fans, there is an endless search for the latest trends, a quest for explanations, and a desire to see empires built and legacies created.

Few could doubt that Bayern Munich were worthy champions in a most curious 2019-20 football season. They played some exhilarating football in dismantling Barcelona 8-2 in the quarter-final and were superior in the final against Paris Saint-Germain.

Yet, look back to last autumn and Bayern were a club in turmoil. They had lost 5-1 to Eintracht Frankfurt, their heaviest defeat for a decade, and coach Niko Kovac was sacked.

Flick was promoted from within. He had not been in charge of a team for 15 years since a spell at Hoffenheim, and was only supposed to see Bayern through to the winter break.

Winner...Flick is the latest German manager to be widely-praised

Instead, he swiftly rejuvenated the team. Yes, it was a high-pressing game, but it came with flexible and pragmatic adjustments in tactics during matches. He also had Robert Lewandowski.

A prolific goalscorer who stays fit and in form is crucial to champion teams. If Kylian Mbappe had taken his chance just before half-time in the Champions League final, isn't it likely that PSG would have lifted the trophy?

Here is the profound truth of the modern game: winning the Champions League is about the marginal moments far more than the tactical trends.

The moment of genius when Trent Alexander-Arnold took a quick corner for Liverpool's decisive goal against Barcelona in the 2019 semi-finals; Sergio Ramos' 93rd-minute header in the 2014 final that opened the door for Real Madrid to beat Atletico in extra-time; the many chances missed by Bayern in the finals of 1999 and 2012 that allowed unlikely comebacks for Manchester United and Chelsea.

Margins are slim between Europe's major clubs, and sometimes between them and the next level of teams like Ajax, Atalanta, Lyon and Leipzig. This is why the Champions League is so compelling – because it is unpredictable.

> Here is the profound truth of the modern game: winning the Champions League is about the marginal moments far more than the tactical trends

In the knockouts it is a proper cup competition, where one poor match, one piece of misfortune, one key injury, can end the hopes of the best teams. Pick this season's winner? Not likely.

The football intelligentsia will guide you towards a German coach now that Pep Guardiola's style has supposedly been "found out", and when his old club Barcelona are suffering internal chaos.

They are just guessing. We don't have a clue who will be European champions in 2021. It could be any of a dozen clubs.

Who knows how Andrea Pirlo will fare as head coach at Juventus? He could be the most inspired choice.

Will Messi's form be affected by the saga? Will another year of experience make Dortmund's youngsters a force? Will PSG take the final step next time? Is the rejuvenation of Manchester United magic or make believe?

We haven't yet mentioned Liverpool or Real Madrid or Manchester City. The transfer work of Internazionale and Chelsea may prove substantial.

Which club will be in crisis, change coach, and emerge as a revitalised unstoppable juggernaut? Remember how Zinedine Zidane took charge of Real in January 2016 and won the Champions League months later?

He won three titles in succession, yet without amazing tactical innovation. Zidane just found the practical knack of winning matches, and his team came out on top in the decisive moments. In the end, this is what matters most.

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

Something's got to give

Exhausted...Elite footballers are being pushed to the max

European football is teetering on a knife-edge. One positive COVID test too many, and the entire tightrope could sever with consequences far more financially damaging than even this year's initial lockdown.

This has come as no surprise to FIFPRO. The international players' union has been warning FIFA, UEFA and the European leagues and clubs about the increasing risks of a fixtures logjam to players' short-term fitness and long-term health.

Those warnings were repeatedly drowned out by trumpets proclaiming the equation of more competitions + more matches = more money. After all, came the response to FIFPRO, it's your members whose pay packets will benefit. Why deny them the rewards of their extra labours?

The fixtures confusion created by the COVID-19 pandemic sparked a mixed response in Europe. Some leagues shut down immediately, others waited to resume behind closed doors, then UEFA devised its Final Eight tournaments to resolve the Champions and Europa Leagues.

Before the action kicked off in Portugal and Germany, UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin insisted that this revised solution was a one-off reaction to the emergency, never to be repeated. But no one, in this pandemic world, can see even six months ahead. Before the Champions League final, Ceferin was conceding that, just maybe, the enforced format had some merit.

A repeat may prove inevitable. Ceferin had learned, fast, that the route ahead for football, even within its date-specific international calendar, is clouded in doubt.

Today's fans are oblivious to the bad old days of the mid-20th century when international and domestic competitions tumbled all over each other. As late as the 1970s, star South American players missed World Cups because their clubs refused to release them. Not until 20 years ago was a formal international calendar laid down.

It was devised by Michel Platini, at the behest of then FIFA president Sepp Blatter. Platini, in his pre-UEFA days, did a good job. The calendar slotted national team dates around domestic demands and international club needs. It was jammed tight, but it worked – and the big clubs still had the freedom to undertake lucrative preseason trips around north America and Asia to suit their multi-national sponsors.

> No room for manoeuvre. No room for unexpected interruptions, delays, deferments. Even bad weather is a threat to the calendar, never mind a global pandemic

How FIFA and Blatter paid Platini for his labours is now, two decades later, the subject of a Swiss criminal investigation. But that is a story for another day.

Platini did not envisage that Champions League groups might not kick off until October; he did not envisage that UEFA might create a Nations League to further clog up the works; he did not envisage the complex intermingling of Nations League with Euro 2020 play-offs.

No sooner are they out of the way in the spring then national managers must confront the World Cup qualifying challenge. This is already a struggle for the rest of the world. In both Asia and South America, postponements of six months or more have been enforced. Why should Europe, with its later start, have it any easier?

That is why FIFA has conceded that national team breaks can now be triple-headers instead of just double-headers. That is why domestic cups are jettisoning two-legged ties and replays. That is why UEFA has ruled that multiple postponements because of positive COVID tests are not possible. Teams undermined by quarantine and isolation orders will be deemed to have forfeited their matches, losing them without a ball being kicked.

This draconian solution emphasises how impossibly tight the calendar has become. No room for manoeuvre. No room for unexpected interruptions, delays, deferments. Even bad weather is a threat to the calendar, never mind a global pandemic.

Nations League...This month's matches will add to the fixture congestion

If Europe's clubs had only their own competitions for concern that would be enough. But no date has yet been agreed for the Nations League finals, the delayed Euro 2020 finals are scheduled for June 11–July 11, non-European players will be fretting over their participation in the CONCACAF Gold Cup (July 10 to August 1) and South American stars may be busy all next summer with World Cup qualifiers and the pushed-back Copa America.

Beyond all that, domestic calendars will have to start the reshuffle, which takes account of the winter scheduling of the 2022 World Cup finals in Qatar.

Even the grand design of the president of FIFA himself has been cast overboard.

Gianni Infantino brought a big idea with him on assuming command of world football in 2016. As general secretary of UEFA he had seen the popular and financial magnetism of the Champions League. As new president of FIFA, why not kidnap that magic with an expanded Club World Cup?

After all, even after splashing the millions to attract Real Madrid, Barcelona, Juventus, Manchester United & Co, think of the zillion dollars of profit. Then FIFA could spread even more "development" cash among its 211 FAs and, since most were impoverished minnows, they would gratefully vote for their president again, again and again.

Indeed, one day the voting weight of those minnows in FIFA Congress might even change the statutes so that the president would no longer be bound by that nuisance rule restricting him to a maximum of three four-year terms.

What could possibly go wrong?

Now Infantino's "Big Idea" is just one more COVID casualty.

His expanded Club World Cup was planned for China next summer, with 24 teams, half of them from Europe. That has been drowned out. Firstly FIFA hit problems over funding. Then came opposition from UEFA, wary of the threat to the status of its Champions League. Finally came a *coup de grace* in the rescheduling to 2021 of everything from Euro 2020 to the Olympic Games.

This is deeply worrying for FIFA. Its wealth is generated only by the World Cup. All its other competitions run at a subsidised loss. It mined its reserves to prop up small FAs hit by the pandemic. But the reserve fund was established to cover a force majeure wipe-out of a World Cup. It is not a bottomless well of cash, an inexhaustible revenue resource for an under-pressure president.

Infantino says the Club World Cup will be slotted back into the calendar when circumstances permit, for both sporting and financial reasons. But no one can say when. No one can predict how or even whether the current calendar can survive. It's tight enough as it is, never mind new competitions. Playing out the present programme may even be too much to ask.

In the event of a second wave, who knows what will happen.

LAW AND DISORDER

Sport and the law do not co-exist comfortably. Statutes of all the world's associations and confederations prohibit fighting out football battles in the civil courts. Everyone is supposed to accept the verdict of the Court of Arbitration for Sport in Lausanne.

But, repeatedly, the status of CAS is coming under scrutiny. A review last year recommended that some hearings should be held in public, for the sake of transparency. That justice should be seen to be done. So far that has fallen on deaf ears.

The Trinidad & Tobago FA wanted to protest to CAS against FIFA's imposition of a normalisation committee. It pulled back when the financial consequences became apparent and went to the local High Court instead. FIFA threatened international suspension.

Separately, FIFA president Gianni Infantino became the subject of a Swiss criminal investigation arising out of a series of meeting with the now-departed Attorney-General. "Absurd," Infantino has called it. He has been cleared by FIFA's tame ethics committee, but of what, no one knows.

Murmurings of concern have arisen within the European, African and South American confederations. But that, for now, is probably the limit in this COVID-19 era: mere whispers. There are other priorities. It's an ill wind, indeed.

Read more on TTFA v FIFA on page 90.

OBITUARIES

Nomad...Riedl watches Indonesia during his final spell in charge

Alfred RIEDL (1949–2020)
The former Austria striker had a nomadic career – as a player he starred for Austria Vienna and scored over 80 goals in Belgium for Antwerp and Standard Liege. His coaching career took him even further afield, taking charge of international teams Laos, Liechtenstein, Vietnam, Palestine and Indonesia.

Fred DAVIES (1939–2020)
After success as a goalkeeper with Wolverhampton Wanderers, Cardiff City and Bournemouth, Davies moved into coaching. His most successful period came at Shrewsbury Town, who he guided to the Division Three title in 1994 and their first ever Wembley appearance two years later.

Goalkeeper...Davies during his playing career

Georg VOLKERT (1945–2020)
The striker began his career at Nurnberg (winning the Bundesliga in 1968), before going on to spells at FC Zurich, Hamburg (where he won the DFB-Pokal and the European Cup-winners Cup) and Stuttgart. He also won 12 caps for West Germany.

Hammadi AGREBI (1951–2020)
A key part of the Tunisia squad that reached their first World Cup in 1978, midfielder Agrebi is one of the greatest players in the history of his hometown club CS Sfaxien, where he played for over 26 years. After he ended his career, a statue was erected in his honour outside the stadium, while his No.8 shirt has now been retired by the club.

Ajibade BABALADE (1972–2020)
The defender earned 13 caps for Nigeria, and was part of the squad that came third at the 1992 Africa Cup of Nations. Although he spent most of his club career in his home country, he also enjoyed spells in South Korea with Anyang LG Cheetahs and in Austria with Sturm Graz.

International...Babalade won 13 Nigeria caps

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

The end of La Liga's Champions League dominance?

It's never wise to read too much into the results of one season, and particularly not one as unusual as 2019-20. Still, it felt significant that, for the first time since 2007, there wasn't a single La Liga side in the semi-finals of the Champions League. Odd things can happen in knockout football – having provided all four finalists of the two European competitions the previous season, there were no Premier League semi-finalists either – but what was striking was *how* the Spanish teams went out.

Manchester City were eliminated following a surprising and destabilising tactical switch from manager Pep Guardiola; Liverpool went out through a goalkeeping error after a slightly freakish game; Chelsea cannot defend against counters and met an excellent Bayern Munich; Tottenham had a season when problems came home to roost leading to a change of manager. Given the immense wealth of the Premier League, it's reasonable to suggest their clubs have underperformed in Europe en masse over the past decade but it's difficult to isolate one reason for their exits in 2019-20.

But look at the four La Liga clubs. Valencia are Valencia and have their own sense of perpetual crisis, but they were bullied by Atalanta in the last 16. Real Madrid seemed startled by Manchester City's pressing, particularly in the first half of the second leg, and ended up self-destructing by giving the ball away repeatedly. Barcelona, as so often over the past four seasons, looked laboured in midfield and were swatted aside by a much more dynamic Bayern. And most significant of all were Atletico, who were physically and tactically outmatched by RB Leipzig. In all four games, the Spanish side looked slower and less powerful than their opponents – and that constitutes a worrying trend.

Barca humiliation... Goalkeeper Marc-Andre ter Stegen

Shackled...Atletico Madrid's Joao Felix

Since 2009, La Liga has been the dominant force in the Champions League by some margin. Barcelona's first triumph under Pep Guardiola was the beginning of a run of seven titles in a decade for Spanish sides. In part that was the result of two great individuals in Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, and in part because of the tactical innovation and excellence of Guardiola. His Barca redrew the parameters of what was considered possible in football, and led to teams more generally taking a far more possession-based approach.

> In all four games, the Spanish side looked slower and less powerful than their opponents

While Real Madrid never took on the philosophy wholesale and remained far more driven by big stars with big personalities who reliably performed in crunch games, in the technical excellence of Luka Modric and Toni Kroos and the way they, at their best, could control a midfield, there was at least a reflection of the same method. At Atletico, of course, Diego Simeone was doing something very different, but he too was influenced by Barca, if only because he had to devise a way to play against opponents who had taken on those passing ideals.

But football has moved on. The Spanish model has been replaced by the German one. It's no coincidence that three of the coaches in the Champions League semi-finals were German. Regaining the ball has become more important than retaining it. Possession football

has yielded to something more physical and all four Spanish Champions League exits at least in part resulted from not being able to cope.

Perhaps this is inevitable after a run of such sustained success. To keep winning is, almost unavoidably, to invite inertia. Why would anybody change a formula that is successful? The tendency will always be to keep doing what works. But as players age, or move on, and new players struggle to integrate, that offers the opportunity for others to overtake. In the super club era, the problems are magnified by the fact that they are essentially unassailable domestically. Last season was one of the worst in Barcelona's history and yet they still came second.

There is entropy and complacency, and that is seen most surely at Atletico, a club that has forged its reputation in not being complacent. For what feels like an eternity, they have been locked in a debate about style: how far can the anti-*futbol* of Simeone take them, and do they need to become more expansive if they are ever to challenge Real Madrid and Barcelona in the long run? The familiar pattern played out: a summer spree, some indifferent results, then a return to basics and improvement. Joao Felix, the iconic signing, didn't even start against Leipzig. He made a difference when he came on, before being shut down when Julian Nagelsmann changed shape and introduced Tyler Adams. The sense throughout was that Leipzig were simply tougher and smarter – two areas in which Atletico would have expected to dominate.

It's only one season – and Sevilla did continue their exceptional record in the Europa League – but it does feel that football is moving into a new era, one in which the tactical ideas of Spain have been supplanted by those of Germany.

Error...Raphael Varane cost Real Madrid against Manchester City

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Left out... Giorgio Chiellini

1 DROPPED

36-year-old veteran Giorgio Chiellini might have thought he'd heard every excuse in football, but even he must have been surprised to hear why he'd missed out on Italy's Nations League clash with Bosnia & Herzegovina.

When asked after the game why he'd chosen to drop the World Cup winner, *Azzurri* boss Roberto Mancini told *Football Italia*: "It was my fault. They showed me the line-up, I didn't have my glasses on and just said it was fine. I didn't notice Acerbi was there rather than Chiellini."

2 CZECH B TEAM

COVID-19 once again had a big impact on a football match, this time in the UEFA Nations League clash between Czech Republic and Scotland.

The Czech's first-choice squad was quarantined after two players tested positive for coronavirus, forcing them to call up an entirely new selection. All 23 players were domestically based, and only two had previous international experience. In spite of this, the Czechs scored first, before eventually going down 2-1.

3 UNITED CITY FC

No, this isn't an ill-fated plan to try to combine the strength of the two Manchester clubs, but a response to the coronavirus pandemic by MMC Sportz Asia. The sports marketing firm created the Philippines-based club after purchasing Ceres-Negros FC, champions for the last three years, and renaming them.

4 THE CASE OF THE MISSING TROPHY

While outlining plans to build a museum that would showcase their greatest achievements, the Egyptian Football Association came across a problem: they have lost their AFCON trophy.

After winning the competition for the third time in a row in 2010, the North Africans were allowed to keep the trophy, yet a decade on it is nowhere to be found. Both CAF and the EFA are conducting an investigation into the case.

In 1966, the World Cup trophy went missing ahead of the tournament, before being found in London by a dog called Pickles.

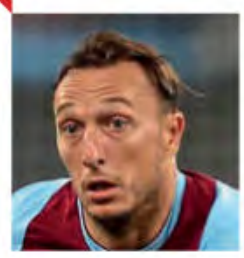
5 HEROES IN A HALF SHELL

Istanbul Basaksehir are the latest club to announce a new signing with an unusual video.

The player in question is former Manchester United defender Rafael, with the theme of the video inspired by the cartoon, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. With the Brazilian full-back (almost) sharing a name with one of the shelled crime-fighters, Raphael, the Turkish champions revealed their new addition to the sound of the programme's theme tune, and got the new boy involved by giving him an eye-mask.

In England, Tottenham new boy Matt Doherty's reveal was more downplayed, with the signing announced via a video of him deleting an old tweet saying: "I love Arsenal forever and ever and ever."

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle...Rafael's signing video



"As captain of this football club I'm gutted, angry and sad that Grady [Diangana] has left, great kid with a great future!!!!!"

West Ham skipper Mark Noble voices his displeasure over the club's transfer business

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

IN

Returning... Henrik Larsson

EUROPE

Ronald Koeman's overhaul of the Barcelona backroom staff began with the appointment of **HENRIK LARSSON** as assistant coach.

Lazio signed former Spain, Liverpool, Napoli and Aston Villa goalkeeper **PEPE REINA** on a free transfer from Milan.

Everton strengthened their midfield with the signings of **ALLAN** from Napoli, **JAMES RODRIGUEZ** from Real Madrid and Watford's **ABDOULAYE DOUCOURE**.

Several players moved across Europe on loan deals, with **ALESSANDRO FLORENZI** joining PSG from Roma, Brescia's **SANDRO TONALI** joining Milan, Schalke's **WESTON McKENNIE** to Juventus, Manchester United's **TAHITH CHONG** to Werder Bremen, Chelsea's **MICHY BATSHUAYI** to Crystal Palace, Porto's **VITINHA** to Wolves, Brighton's **SHANE DUFFY** to Celtic, and Fulham signing **ALPHONSE AREOLA**, **MARIO LEMINA** and **OLA AINA** from

Toffees makeover... James Rodriguez

SUMMER 2020 LATEST MAJOR DEALS

Chelsea new boy... Kai Havertz

Promotion hero... Grady Diangana

Bayer Leverkusen... Patrik Schick

£72m	**Kai Havertz**	Bayer Leverkusen to Chelsea
£50m	**Ben Chilwell**	Leicester City to Chelsea
£35m	**Fabio Silva**	Porto to Wolves
£34.7m	**Donny van de Beek**	Ajax to Manchester United
£28m	**Ollie Watkins**	Brentford to Aston Villa
£27m	**Gabriel Magalhaes**	Lille to Arsenal
£25m	**Thiago Alcantara**	Bayern Munich to Liverpool
£24m	**Patrik Schick**	Roma to Bayer Leverkusen
£22.5m	**Allan**	Napoli to Everton
£21.6m	**Darwin Nunez**	Almeria to Benfica
£21.5m	**Timothy Castagne**	Atalanta to Leicester City
£20m	**Yannick Carrasco**	Dalian Pro to Atletico Madrid
£20m	**James Rodriguez**	Real Madrid to Everton
£20m	**Callum Wilson**	Bournemouth to Newcastle
£20m	**Abdoulaye Doucoure**	Watford to Everton
£18m	**Grady Diangana**	West Ham United to West Bromwich Albion
£17m	**Emiliano Martinez**	Arsenal to Aston Villa
£16.2m	**Vedat Muriqi**	Fenerbahce to Lazio
£16.2m	**Roberto Inglese**	Napoli to Parma
£16m	**Eberechi Eze**	QPR to Crystal Palace
£16m	**Matty Cash**	Nottingham Forest to Aston Villa
£15m	**Pervis Estupinan**	Watford to Villarreal
£15m	**Jamal Lewis**	Norwich City to Newcastle
£15m	**Matt Doherty**	Wolves to Tottenham Hotspur
£14.2m	**Oscar Rodriguez**	Real Madrid to Sevilla
£14m	**Kevin Volland**	Bayer Leverkusen to Monaco
£13.5m	**Jhon Cordoba**	Cologne to Hertha Berlin
£13.5m	**Serhou Guirassy**	Amiens to Rennes
£13m	**Aleksey Miranchuk**	Lokomotiv Moscow to Atalanta
£13m	**Robin Koch**	Freiburg to Leeds United
£10.8m	**Marcos Acuna**	Sporting to Sevilla
£8.1m	**Ante Rebic**	Eintracht Frankfurt to Milan
£8.1m	**Andre Silva**	Milan to Eintracht Frankfurt
£7.2m	**Philipp Max**	Augsburg to PSV
£7.2m	**Caio Henrique**	Atletico Madrid to Monaco
£7m	**Jayden Bogle**	Derby to Sheffield United
£6.8m	**Karol Linetty**	Sampdoria to Torino
£6.5m	**Ivan Toney**	Peterborough to Brentford
£6m	**Harrison Reed**	Southampton to Fulham
£6m	**Sebastian Andersson**	Union Berlin to Cologne
£5.4m	**Sergio Rico**	Sevilla to PSG
£5m	**Jordan Hugill**	West Ham United to Norwich
£4.5m	**Loic Mbe Soh**	PSG to Nottingham Forest
£4.5m	**Maxence Lacroix**	Sochaux to Wolfsburg
£4.5m	**Geronimo Rulli**	Real Sociedad to Villarreal
£4.5m	**Steve Mounie**	Huddersfield to Brest
£4m	**Jonathan Panzo**	Monaco to Dijon
£4m	**Max Lowe**	Derby to Sheffield United

"After my first training session at Manchester United, I got home and asked my agent if I could tear up the contract and go back to Arsenal"

Alexis Sanchez, speaking after leaving Manchester United for Internazionale permanently

Appointments, sackings and loans

Transfer window headliners... Bale and Thiago

Major Premier League moves

Premier League sides Tottenham and Liverpool announced two of the league's biggest arrivals of the year within hours of each other, with Spurs re-signing Gareth Bale on loan from Real Madrid and the Reds recruiting Bayern Munich midfielder Thiago Alcantara for £25 million.

Welshman Bale, who left North London in 2013 for a then world-record transfer fee of £85.3 million, won four Champions League titles with Madrid, while Thiago won the crown with Bayern back in August.

PSG, Southampton and Torino respectively. Meanwhile, **DANI CEBALLOS** returned for a second season at Arsenal.

There was also a flurry of free transfers with **RYAN FRASER** joining Newcastle United, **MALANG SARR** to Chelsea, **CLAUDIO BRAVO** to Real Betis and **YUTO NAGATOMO** to Marseille, while **OLIVER BURKE** and **CALLUM ROBINSON** swapped clubs to join Sheffield United and West Bromwich Albion respectively.

ASIA

PATRICK KISNORBO was named as the new head coach of Melbourne City, while Melbourne Victory appointed **GRANT BREBNER**.

Australia midfielder **AARON MOOY** lefts Brighton and Hove Albion to sign for Chinese Super League side Shanghai SIPG.

Iranian football saw a raft of managerial changes. Persian Gulf Pro League clubs Shahr Khodro appointed former Iran goalkeeper **MEHDI RAHMATI**, Esteghlal opted for **MAJID NAMJOO-MOTLAGH** as interim boss, and Sepahan appointed former player **MOHARRAM NAVIDKIA**.

Chinese Super League new boy...Aaron Mooy

OUT

Sacked...Diego Forlan

Premier League legend...Barry

EUROPE

GARETH BARRY, the Premier League appearances record holder with 653 games, retired from football.

Parma sacked head coach **ROBERT D'AVERSA**, who guided the club from Italy's third tier to Serie A.

SOUTH AMERICA

DIEGO FORLAN, a former Penarol player, was sacked after just 11 games in charge of the Montevideo-based club.

AFRICA

JEAN-BAPTISTE MUGIRANEZA called time on his Rwanda career after a 14-year spell that saw him rack up 68 appearances and seven goals.

ASIA

Japan's Asian Cup-winning defender **ATSUTO UCHIDA** and former Wigan Athletic and Oman goalkeeper **ALI AL HABSI** announced their retirement.

CSL club Tianjin TEDA replaced coach Uli Stielike with **WANG BAOSHAN**.

TONY POPOVIC activated a clause to quit as Perth Glory coach in pursuit of European managerial opportunities.

Xanthi-bound... Tony Popovic

Dariusz Kurowski reports

POLAND

From the potato field to Champions League winner

The story of Robert Lewandowski's early career, told by the coaches that knew him first

Leszno is a small, quiet town in Poland with a population of around 4,000 people, 30 kilometres from the capital city of Warsaw. Until recently, it had relatively few claims to fame; now it is known as the place where Robert Lewandowski lived and grew up.

"In 2016 we gave him Honourable Citizenship, the first such title in our history, because we are very proud of him," declared former Leszno mayor Andrzej Cieslak.

Playing in the streets of Leszno, Lewandowski fell in love with football. When he was just eight, his father, Krzysztof, took him to Varsovia, a youth club in Warsaw.

"I remember him as the smallest, skinniest boy," recalls Lewandowski's first coach, Marek Siwecki, who passed away last year. "His legs looked like two thin sticks. But I let him show me what he could do with a ball, and I said: 'Okay, you will join my team, even though I have a group of players that are two years older.'"

To say that it was a humble start for the future Champions League winner would be an understatement: Varsovia's training base was a disaster.

"Only one field for all the teams – so uneven that it was called "potato field" – two barracks with dressing rooms, and no showers," says Siwecki. "Only a gutter and a tap with cold water for the boys to wash their dirty legs a bit after training."

With such conditions, it is worth asking: why did Krzysztof decide to bring his son to such a club?

"Because nobody else wanted him!" explains Siwecki. "I know that he visited the big Warsaw clubs like Legia and Polonia, but for them he was too small. I could not understand why they did not even test him on the field. Fortunately, I did."

First coaches...Marek Krzywicki (left) and Marek Siwecki (right)

Nicknamed "Bobek" (little Bob) by his team-mates, Lewandowski very quickly became a part of the team.

"He was a very quiet boy, but only until the moment he entered the pitch," says Siwecki. "He started to fight and never complained. When you play very well, older boys accept you at once. It was the same with Bobek. He always played as a striker and the ball loved him, so he scored many goals. The ball always found him, even during the corners, when he was the shortest one among much taller players in the penalty area. And because he had to fight with stronger boys that were two years older, I think that he became strong himself."

Despite this early success, Krzysztof began to think about other possibilities for his son.

"Robert was a very good cross-country runner, and one day his father ▸

adidas
FC BAYERN MÜNCHEN
adidas

Potato field...Varsovia's ground has had a makeover since Lewandowski played here

started to explain to me that maybe it would be better for his son to concentrate on running," recalls Siwecki. "I could not believe it. I angrily asked him: 'What do you want to do?' We had a long and very rough conversation, but finally I fortunately convinced him! Football remained the main aim for Robert."

Looking back, Siwecki had no doubts that Lewandowski would not have made it as a professional player without the help of his parents.

"His father was a judo player and his mother a volleyball player. They knew sport and understood it well. When they watched Robert's games, they never shouted at him anything like other parents normally do."

In 2005, Krzysztof unexpectedly passed away.

It was a defining moment in Robert's young life, but it made him more motivated than ever. He began to travel to training by himself – a two-hour journey each way by public transport.

Shortly after his father's death, Lewandowski ended his seven-year stay at Varsovia to join fourth division side Delta Warsaw. He didn't stay long, moving on to Legia Warsaw's reserve side, but after a season they released him over doubts about an injury. The coach that had signed him, Jerzy Kraska, knew even then that the club had made a big mistake.

"Now I am so proud that I brought Lewandowski to my team," he says. "When they sacked me, they did not ask about him. Somebody higher than me in the club structure made the decision, but I know that Robert dreamed to play for Legia."

Remembered...Lewandowski's original shirt still hangs on the walls at Varsovia

"Reasons to train at Varsovia...Robert Lewandowski was our pupil"

Was it clear, even then, that Legia had let Poland's greatest ever goalscorer slip through their fingers?

"To be honest, I did not expect he would be such a great player some day," admits Kraska. "But he was among the team's better players and a ball always found him on the pitch. He could score with a header, right or left foot".

After Lewandowski was released, Marek Krzywicki, another of his former coaches at Varsovia, stepped in: "Legia did not want him any longer. Nobody from the club even tried to talk with him; the office secretary announced the decision. He was totally broken down, so

Junior...Lewandowski (bottom right), was the smallest player for Varsovia-Polonia, a joint-team for one season in 1996-97

his mother called me. I said: 'Come to Varsovia, we will think it over.'"

During the meeting with Lewandowski, Krzywicki offered to call Znicz Pruszkow, a club based just outside Warsaw. As it happened, the third division side were interested in the young striker.

"We knew Lewandowski," explains former Znicz chairman Sylwiusz Mucha-Orlinski. "We had observed him for over a year. As for his injury? You can always recover."

For the first two months, Lewandowski did not play, taking his time to reach full fitness. "When he finally become a starter in the team, he played regularly all the time," remembers Mucha-Orlinski. "And he regularly scored goals."

In spite of his delayed start, Lewandowski topped the third division scoring charts with 15 goals, helping the side win promotion. His second season was even better, adjusting to the second tier with ease, and rattling in 21 goals and winning another golden boot.

"Honestly, I did not think he could be such a great player," says Zbigniew Kowalski, one of Lewandowski's team-mates at Znicz. "But he was different for one reason. Other young players, especially in lower divisions, think they know better than their coaches. But he was calm and modest – he always sat in the corner of a dressing room, listened carefully to what that coach told him, and then did it on the field."

His goalscoring exploits caught the attention of football agents, and plenty came to Pruszkow to have a look at him. Eventually he signed up with Cezary Kucharski, who represented him until 2018.

> "I remember him as the smallest, skinniest boy. His legs looked like two thin sticks. But I let him show me what he could do with a ball, and I said: 'Okay, you will join my team'"
>
> **Marek Siwecki, Lewandowski's first coach**

"The Znicz chairman [Mucha-Orlinski] was important, because he did not think only about money," Kucharski remembers. "He helped to build careers of young players."

As Mucha-Orlinski explains: "Because Lewandowski came to us for free, we had a gentleman's agreement: he could choose the club which would like to buy him. He chose Lech Poznan not because of money, but because they needed him the most. Other offers were better for us, like from Jagiellonia Bialystok or especially Cracovia Krakow, but we respected Robert's decision. Lech paid us just under 1.5 million zloty [around £300,000]. It was the highest Znicz transfer ever."

Kucharski agrees.

"We carefully examined all the offers, their advantages and disadvantages, because almost every club from the Polish league wanted him. Money was not the most important thing. I had a look at Lech. They were progressing, and had a few offensive players with a similar style of playing to Robert. So I realised this was the best place for him to make progress."

Legia, who did not want Lewandowski two years earlier, came back in for him as well.

"We could offer him a better contract than Lech without any problem [around £9,000-per-month, according to Polish media speculation]," explains Miroslaw Trzeciak, responsible for Legia's transfers at the time. "The problem was that his agent demanded a percentage of income from the next potential transfer too, and we did not accept such rules."

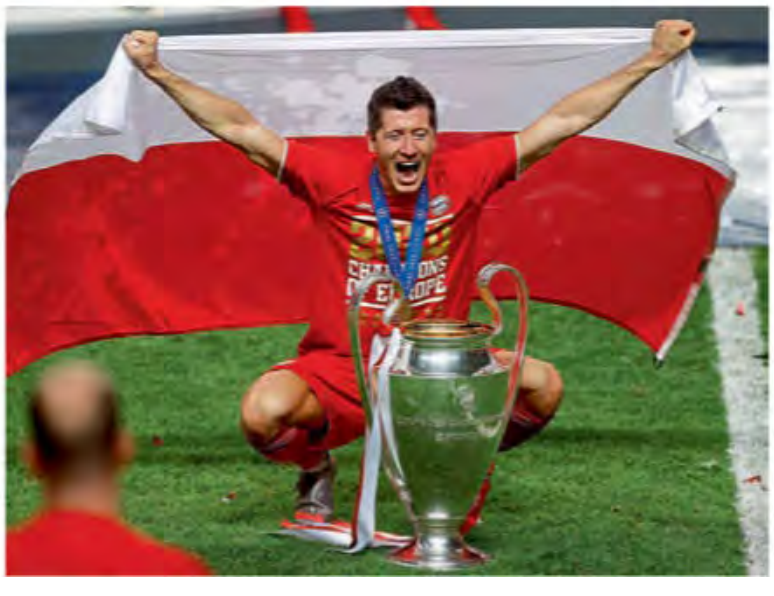
So, Lewandowski joined Lech Poznan in the summer of 2008. In September, he was called up for international duty by Poland's Dutch national coach, Leo Beenhakker. Team kit man Wieslaw Ignasiewicz remembers their first conversation: "Beenhakker told him: 'You will be a great player. Your time will come. So, be patient and wait.' And he answered: 'Thank you for the compliment, boss.'"

That month, Lewandowski came off the substitutes' bench to score on his debut against San Marino. It was a first important step in an incredible international career, which has seen him play more games and score more goals than any other Poland player in history, while also captaining his country at two major international tournaments. It is hard to see his goal record being toppled any time soon, if ever.

Reflecting on his former team-mate's achievements, Zbigniew Kowalski says: "When I have a look at him now, I realise that he always had an aim which he tried to fulfil. If he did it, he immediately had another one. I think that is one of the main reasons he became such a great player."

It is that attitude which has helped make Lewandowski one of the world's great number nines.

Poland legend... "Bobek" with his first Champions League trophy



Photos credit: Dariusz Kurowski and Marek Siwecki

Henry Flynn reports

AUSTRIA

Trailblazing in the mountains

Fan-owned club FC Pinzgau Saalfelden are finding novel ways to include their supporters

The lush mountains of Austria would normally seem an unlikely destination for a growing hive of supporter activity.

But thanks to an inspired approach, it is now. Third division amateur club FC Pinzgau Saalfelden – an hour's drive from Austrian juggernauts Red Bull Salzburg – have come up with an original idea to spark excitement.

The club was 12 years old when, in July 2019, American Mark Ciociola stepped in to become their CEO.

Formed in 2007 by struggling rivals Saalfelden SK and ESV Saalfelden, who settled their differences to create a name worthy of attracting the best local talent, Pinzgau have yo-yoed between the third and fourth tier, but finally have something considerable to shout about.

Disillusioned with the fan experience at MLS side Real Salt Lake City – the team Ciociola supported in the United States – he proposed a revolutionary idea. By investing $500 (approximately £380), fans from around the world could not only own part of the club, but also impact matters on the pitch.

"In the US, I saw these full stadiums and thought these people were investing a lot of time, money and energy into their club," says Ciociola, who harbours hopes of reaching the first division.

"It's usually a millionaire or billionaire who owns the team. So, there's always this disconnect between what goes on in the front office and what fans actually get to know, see and do.

"I wanted to come up with a better way to own a football club and involve the fans. What better way to do that than actually let them be the owners."

Coaching the team is ex-Germany left wing-back Christian Ziege, whose status has helped draw extra interest in the side.

Pinzgau's league season began as early as August, and there has already been evidence of supporters having their say in what Ciociola insists is not just a membership model.

So far, fan owners have been able to discuss the club's strategy with officials, including Ciociola and Ziege. They have even explored topics such as player transfers, allowing for a much greater transparency between both parties.

There will be more to come too, with initiatives such as designing the team kit already underway. The club is also keen to involve the skillsets of its owners, whether it be regarding the players, bookkeeping or legal aspects.

Of course, fan-ownership is not an unknown concept, but Pinzgau's methods are unique and push the boundaries on access and interaction. In neighbouring Germany, the Bundesliga enforces a 50+1 rule to give supporters majority ownership of their club (despite RB Leipzig and Hoffenheim finding some loopholes in the system). While the same regulation exists in Austria, the lion's share of control belongs to non-profit organisations instead of supporters.

> "I wanted to come up with a better way to own a football club and involve the fans. What better way to do that than actually let them be the owners"
>
> Mark Ciociola, Pinzgau Saalfelden CEO

Indeed, the power granted to fans to make key decisions is not commonplace in European football, although there are some examples to consider.

In Germany, Union Berlin have a particularly intimate relationship with their fans, who even gathered funds from blood donations to once keep the club afloat, while in Spain, fan-owned Osasuna allowed followers to have the final say on new stadium renovations.

At bigger clubs, the dependency is less. For instance, Barcelona's membership, or socio, system does little to influence the club's decision-making.

Prompted as to whether Pinzgau's ambitions are in any way motivated by countering clubs with different philosophies, such as Red Bull Salzburg, Ciociola maintains that the attention is on themselves.

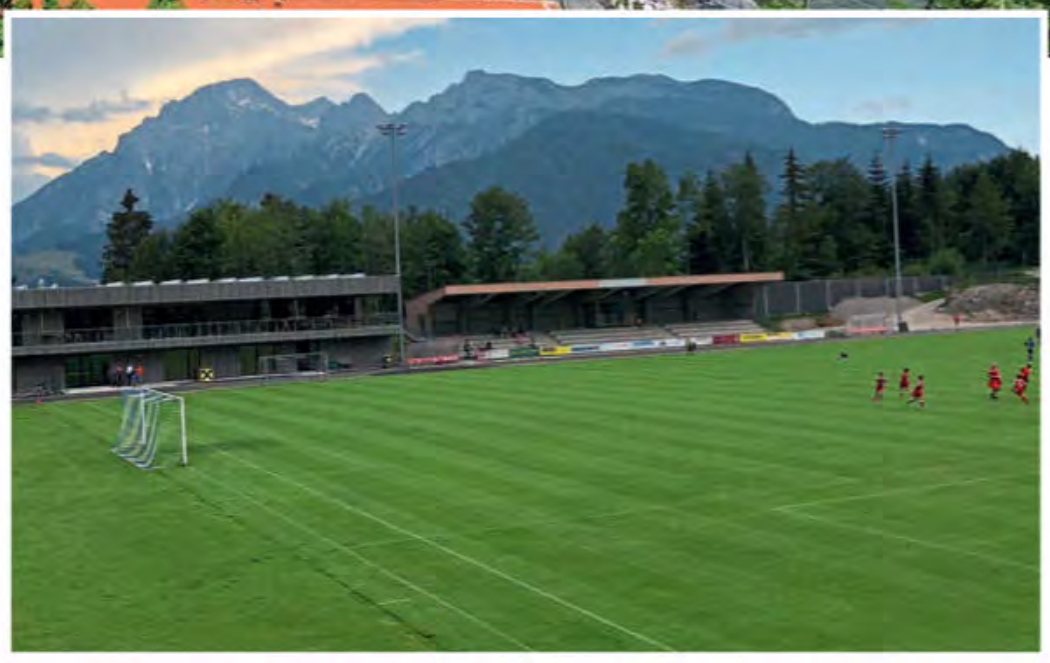
"We're focused on us. The first step is the second league and once we get there, then we can look at the process in front of us and what's needed to get to the top league," Ciociola adds.

"We actually have the second largest youth programme in the state behind Red Bull Salzburg. So, they do a lot of things really well there, but the budget is of course night and day.

"We're something completely unique to Austria and to European football."

Celebrating...Pinzgau finished second in the Salzburg section of Austria's regional third tier in 2019-20

Scenic...Pinzgau's footballing facilities



Saalfelden... Surrounded by mountains

Pinzgau's methods inevitably leave some challenges, such as making sure everybody's voice, wherever they may be, is heard equally. It's a logistical challenge but the response so far has been positive.

Their team is truly international. The squad, which includes Ziege's son Alessandro at the heart of the defence, has an Austrian core but also contains players from the UK, Hungary, Gambia, Burundi and New Zealand.

Off the pitch, efforts have been made to cater for both English and German audiences by providing content and match commentaries in both languages.

Ziege understands the ambitions to develop the team but believes the club's humble beginnings deserve respect too.

"There are lots of things you should always be aware of," he says. "How you are doing things, the area we are in, the traditions of the people and how this club is part of their lives.

"It's a mix of respecting the local people's thoughts and also trying to become a professional club."

Were Pinzgau to reach the top tier, it would further strengthen the prominence of Salzburg teams.

Once upon a time, the capital Vienna was the focal point of Austria's footballing success, with Rapid and Austria Vienna claiming the majority of league titles.

Then came Red Bull Salzburg, who still have catching up to do, but have won a staggering seven titles on the spin.

Such has been their dominance, officials introduced a mini end-of-season play-off league to allow the top six teams to contest the trophy and the bottom six to settle who goes down.

Regardless of whether Pinzgau's formula propels them to similar success, Ciociola hopes their exploits will set a refreshing example.

"I would like to see the model catch on in the future. I think that fans anywhere in the world deserve to have this experience."

Face to face: Christian Ziege

Coach... Christian Ziege

How did your relationship with the club begin?

It was quite simple. I moved to the club only two years ago when I didn't have a job. My wife and I decided to move into this area in Austria where we could follow our son playing football. Through watching him and spending time with him, we formed a connection with the club. There were six games left to play in the 2018-19 season when I said: "I'm here with nothing to do." Then I became involved and it all started for me.

How have things developed since you joined?

We've had to become more professional – in the dressing room, on the pitches and in understanding our ambitions. You can't change everything in one day, especially if you don't have a lot of money. Everything you want to change has something to do with money. So, step-by-step we've made a lot of changes. We've brought in some professional players but it's a process. Half of the team is still working and studying.

What is it like working in the mountains?

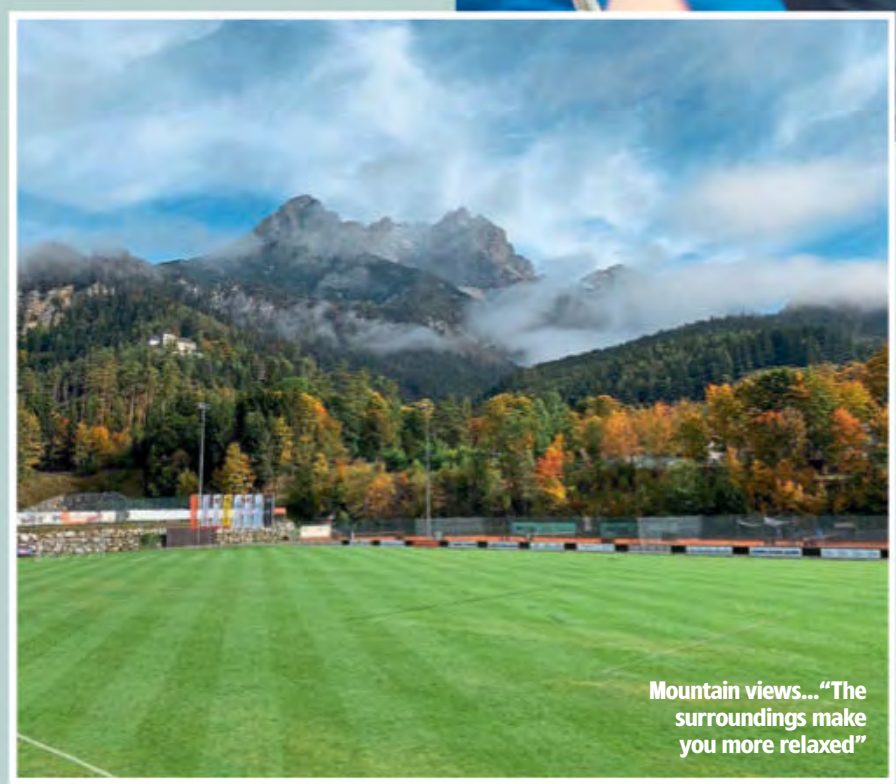
The good thing is that the surroundings make you more relaxed. Obviously, we have our ambitions and we are working a lot, but the environment makes things a bit easier. You wake up in the morning for a session on the field and then you look up and say: "Ooh! Nice mountains here." You stop for ten minutes and just listen to the nature.

How are you finding coaching compared to playing?

More stressful! You have to think a lot more. You have to prepare. As a player you just come in. You look after yourself. You go to the gym or you train but you don't really have to think about the next step, to think about whether this player is right or not? What can we change? There are talks, discussions, meetings and telephone calls. So, I would say that the job as a football player is the best thing that you can have.

How does a matchday experience compare to your playing days?

You can't compare the two. This is still an amateur club. You have small dressing rooms but there are lovely people everywhere. That is probably the difference. You can't even compare it to the places I've been to as a player. But that's not a problem. From my point of view, when it comes to football, there is a pitch, 90 minutes and two goals. It doesn't matter how the dressing room is, how the surroundings are or how the people are, it's a football game.



Mountain views..."The surroundings make you more relaxed"

What are you enjoying most about your role?

It's unique. I guess not many managers take this route and try to make their lives so complicated, but for me it's completely different. I'm happy to live here. I have good surroundings and good circumstances. It's a club that has ambitions, which perhaps means more work than at a big club. We don't have the best physios or the best doctors. Some players are not working full-time at the club. Sometimes we don't even have a pitch to train on when it's raining or when winter arrives because of the conditions. Professional clubs can find good pitches and visit foreign countries even in preseason. You have to find solutions and different schedules. It's a lot of work but it's so interesting and a lot of fun as well.

How important is it to keep local fans on board?

It's always important. Last season we finished second. We could see the football and everything evolving at the club. People should support this club and feel comfortable, realising that this is a club from the region and a club for the people. It has a good relationship with guys arriving from the US who have the same ambitions. They should enjoy the games and what's going on in the area. The next city is Salzburg – a one-hour drive away. In an area like this, if we could reach our ambitions, it would be amazing.

How would it feel to see the club reach the heights of Red Bull Salzburg one day?

That would be a proud feeling because the people here are working hard to achieve this goal. But you should never forget where you're from. We have ambitions, but there is a long way to go. Sometimes you take two steps forwards and then three steps back. It's not going to be easy. Then again, I would be extremely proud. We could say that we achieved something really good. But this is far away in the future.

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ON SALE OCTOBER 30

Josip Ilicic

Atalanta talisman missing from action

The strange case of Atalanta star Josip Ilicic has become one of the great footballing enigmas of this COVID-driven 2020.

Ilicic fell right off the radar, out of the team and out of sight, at the very height of a fabulous Atalanta season which took the Bergamo club to unprecedented heights, not only finishing third in Serie A but ending their season in Lisbon with a Champions League quarter-final elimination by Paris Saint-Germain.

Depression, anxiety and mental stress are nothing new for top-flight professional athletes. It is part of the price some players pay for the joys of a pressurised, physically demanding profession, lived out in the constant, unforgiving glare of the public eye.

Not, indeed, that we know for certain that Ilicic has suffered from some form of depression. Yet what we do know is that, as one source told *World Soccer*: "Whatever else, there is nothing physically wrong with Ilicic."

So what went wrong with the talented 32-year-old Slovene? Since his last appearance for Atalanta in a 2-2 draw with Juventus on July 11, he has become an object of mystery. At first it seemed that he was merely injured and would soon be back. Media reports suggested that he was in a "race against time" to get back for the quarter-final tie in Lisbon. Bit by bit, it emerged that he was not injured but that, nonetheless, would not feature in Portugal.

He continued to remain out of sight and was significantly still missing on the night that Atalanta launched their 2020-21 season in late August. As a matter of principle and out of respect for his privacy, the club will not publicly discuss the "Ilicic question."

Club spokesman Andrea Lazzaroni said that whilst he could tell us nothing about Ilicic's well being, he could confirm that the club still hoped to see him return for training. While they waited for their wayward genius, however, Atalanta understandably covered themselves with the purchase of Lokomotiv Moscow player Aleksey Miranchuk.

His unhappy summer seems all the more mysterious because it happened at the very moment when he and his club were touching unprecedented heights

Believed to have spent much of the summer in his native Slovenia, Ilicic was reportedly back in Bergamo in late August, back training again – albeit on his own – before returning to full training with the club in early September. Speaking about him recently, Slovenian Federation president Radenko Mijatovic suggested that Ilicic is still battling with his "problems."

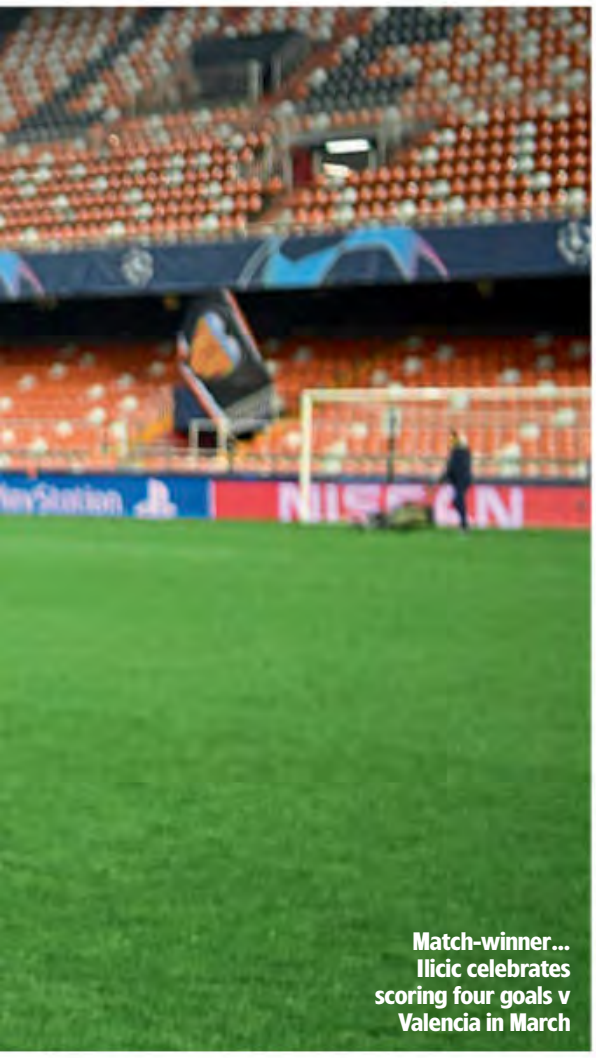
Intriguingly, Mijatovic suggested that Ilicic's difficulties began with the COVID-19 pandemic that, of course, struck Bergamo, home of Atalanta, especially hard. People who have worked with Ilicic, such as coach Bortolo Mutti who had him for a year at Palermo, says that the Slovenian is indeed a "sensitive, if exceptionally talented player."

Mutti says that with Ilicic, you could tell from his first few touches of the ball in any game as to just how his game was going to go. If he started badly, he would become discouraged and disappear from the game, despite his immense talent. In truth, to the outside observer, Ilicic has often seemed inconsistent.

There is little doubt that his absence from the PSG game cost Atalanta dearly. Remember, this is the guy who scored all four Atalanta goals in their previous Champions League game, a 4-3 win in Valencia last March.

As it was, Atalanta ended up playing their biggest-ever game without their two most talented players – Ilicic and Argentine Alejandro Gomez. Whilst Ilicic had dropped himself out, the

Fouled...Ilicic was last seen in Atalanta's July draw with Juventus



Match-winner... Ilicic celebrates scoring four goals v Valencia in March

influential Gomez was out there on the pitch but clearly not in good physical condition, in the end having to come off in the second half.

Without the two players who could best hold on to possession and help Atalanta weather the storm of a second half when they were literally run off their feet by a dominant PSG, Atalanta suffered badly. Even if it was only in time added on that PSG staged their late comeback for their 2-1 win, there was a seeming inevitability about the demise of the exhausted Atalanta.

As for Ilicic, his unhappy summer seems all the more mysterious because it happened at the very moment when he and his club were touching unprecedented heights.

We know too well the tragedy that strikes some players who fail to adjust to life after football, but that is not the case of Ilicic, whose problems hit him even as he rode the crest of a winning wave. So here is hoping that he re-finds his way and that shortly he will once again dazzle and delight us on the field of play. Good luck to him.

Paddy Agnew

Red Bull Bragantino

Brazilian club looking to follow in the footsteps of their German counterparts

In 2010, RB Leipzig were making their debut in the fifth tier of German football. Fast-forward a decade, and they have just lost to Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League semi-finals.

It's that level of meteoric rise that energy drink giant Red Bull are hoping to replicate with Bragantino, having invested around $11.5 million into the Brazilian club since taking over last year.

As well as Leipzig, Red Bull have already invested heavily into New York Red Bulls and Red Bull Salzburg. Bragantino are not, however, the first Brazilian team that the Austrian company have invested in.

In 2007, Red Bull Brasil were created, competing in the Sao Paulo state leagues. Despite some early promise, they ultimately failed to achieve their objective of reaching the top flight. As a result, Red Bull purchased Atletico Bragantino in March 2019, changed their name, and relegated RB Brasil to the status of development team for the newly-purchased outfit.

At the time, the *Massa Bruta* had just clawed their way back into the second tier of Brazilian football, and have since ended their 22-year absence from the top flight by winning Serie B in 2019.

So far they have struggled to step up, although they did draw with giants Santos and Botafogo in their first two games of the 2020 Serie A season. Such results would have only been a distant dream a few years ago, when they were languishing in the third tier.

Similarly to Leipzig, Bragantino are looking to build a squad of young stars who will develop together in the future. CEO Thiago Scuro expects them to be challenging the league's elite in three years. That's a sizeable task given the current landscape of Brazilian football: Flamengo, champions of both Brazil and South America, are challenging the supremacy of the Sao Paulo clubs, led by Palmeiras, who are the most successful team in the league's history and have also won two of the last four titles. In the last 30 years, only one side has won Serie A for the first time – Athletico Paranaense, in 2001.

Still, given the success of RB Leipzig and Red Bull Salzburg (Austrian league champions seven years in row), it is not an unrealistic objective.

Red Bull's biggest challenge will be building the club's presence off the pitch as much as on it. Based in Braganca, about 100km outside of Sao Paulo, the club's Estadio Nabi Abi Chedid holds just shy of 18,000 fans, yet Bragantino only averaged crowds of around 6,000 last year. They've got some way to go to compete with the likes of Flamengo, who averaged just under 60,000 in 2019.

For now, securing their top-flight status is the priority, and the hierarchy will use Red Bull's resources to do it: Luan Candido arrived on loan from Leipzig this summer, as did Luis Phelipe from Salzburg.

Sam Straw

On the rise...Red Bull Bragantino

Red Bull purchased Atletico Bragantino in March 2019, changed their name, and relegated RB Brasil to the status of development team

Vincent Kompany

Another new era begins under the ex-Belgium skipper

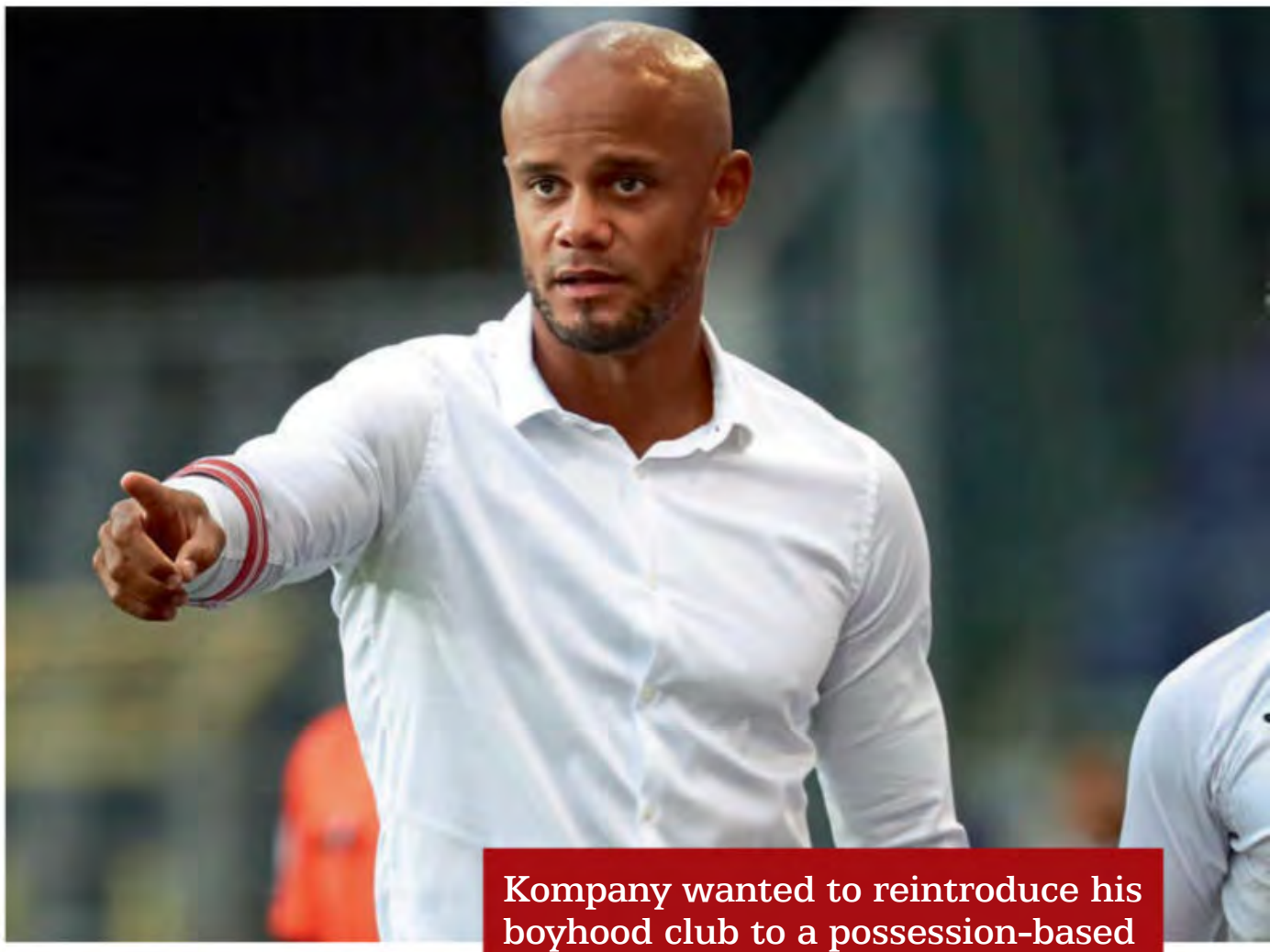
Anderlecht, once Belgium's most potent club, has a new messiah – again. Vincent Kompany, long-time ex-captain of Manchester City and ambassador for an ebullient generation of Belgian players, is the new head coach at the Brussels-based club. In August, Kompany unexpectedly announced his retirement as a player following a career that spanned 17 years at the highest level, marked equally by triumphs and recurring injuries. He led City to their first-ever Premier League title and won a bronze medal with Belgium at the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

Kompany's shock decision prompted a debate on his place in the pantheon of Belgian football gods, but his more immediate concern will be to restore Anderlecht to their former glory. For too long, internal power struggles, financial mismanagement and a woeful transfer policy have blighted the club.

If this is all sounding very familiar, that's because it's happened before. Last summer, Anderlecht plotted to rebuild and compete again in Belgium and Europe. Embattled owner Marc Coucke, sporting director Michael Verschueren and technical director Frank Arnesen landed a major coup: Kompany returned to the Belgian capital as a player-manager in a bid to reconnect with the "Champagne football" that French coach Pierre Sinibaldi introduced in Brussels in the 1960s.

The recruitment process carried on with marquee signing Samir Nasri and loanee Nacer Chadli from Monaco. In England, Kompany benefited from the stewardship of Pep Guardiola, the guru of contemporary coaching with his bold, attractive philosophy based on pressing, positioning and passing. The Belgian said training under Guardiola was like attending university: you'd learn new things every single day.

Kompany wanted to reintroduce his boyhood club to a possession-based game by copying Guardiola's style – to build up play from the back and recover the ball as quickly as possible when out of possession. The idea was presented as a long-term "project." He had few detractors, even if the new blueprint was hardly fool proof: did Kompany have any coaching credentials? Would the dual role not be too demanding? Did the quality of Anderlecht's squad remotely match the tactical system and playing style Kompany envisioned? The Anderlecht hierarchy bypassed a whole series of relevant questions. Kompany, icon, was to carry the club on his shoulders into a new era.



Kompany wanted to reintroduce his boyhood club to a possession-based game by copying Guardiola's style

After all the brouhaha, he failed to translate the theory into practice. Slow, ineffective and impotent, Anderlecht slumped to six points from 27, enduring their worst domestic run since 1922. It was a stark reality check for Kompany and Anderlecht felt compelled to bring in the experienced Frank Vercauteren as his assistant to steady the ship. Arnesen, best known for his role as sporting director at both Tottenham Hotspur and Chelsea, exited the club, presaging a tumultuous second half of the season with endless boardroom shuffles.

Send off...Kompany's last game as a player was a 7-0 win over Zulte-Waregem

Karel Van Eetvelt, former chairman of the Belgian Union of Independent Entrepreneurs, became the club's CEO, and ex-journalist turned businessman Wouter Vandenhaute succeeded Coucke as chairman – a significant step back for the club's owner. In 2017, he had acquired Anderlecht after a bidding war against Vandenhaute. The boardroom restructuring, with Kompany becoming a shareholder as well, was dressed up as a new start, but reflected the malaise at a club burdened by debts. In 2018-19, Anderlecht registered a mammoth loss of €27 million.

On the field, the coaching of Vercauteren with his penchant for organisation and discipline yielded a respectable eighth-place finish.

Coach...Kompany instructs teenage prodigy Yari Verschaeren

But in the first week of 2020-21, the strained relationship between Kompany and Vercauteren came to a head over coaching responsibilities. The former won the boardroom battle and ousted Vercauteren.

Thus begins Kompany-ball 2.0. The youngest Anderlecht head coach since 1945 still brims with confidence and incessantly articulates his football philosophy, without any hint of introspection. He doesn't countenance failure. This season, however, there won't be any mitigating circumstances for him to invoke. He will be solely responsible and subject to the same scrutiny every coach faces in football's zero-sum environment.

Underwhelming, early-season draws with Mouscron and Oostende were perhaps the portent of another difficult season for Anderlecht and Kompany. In a thinly-manned Anderlecht squad, teenage prodigies Yari Verschaeren and Jeremy Doku will be key for the new coach to prove that he is more than simply the latest Guardiola copycat. Kompany's honeymoon then has truly come to an end.

Samindra Kunti

Chelsea

How the Blues have broken their summer transfer window record

Frank Lampard is not the first Chelsea manager of the Roman Abramovich era to begin a new season with a selection headache after a big summer of transfer spending.

The £200 million that the Blues spent this year is the biggest summer outlay in their history, overtaking their previous record of around £190m that was spent in 2017.

Accounting for inflation, both figures are dwarfed by the £222m from 2003. Then, it was Claudio Ranieri who had the conundrum of accommodating a raft of new boys – Hernan Crespo, Damien Duff, Juan Sebastian Veron, Claude Makelele, Adrian Mutu, Wayne Bridge, Geremi, Joe Cole – alongside established performers, including Lampard himself.

This time it is Lampard's turn to juggle a boatload of talent, with the arrivals of Kai Havertz, Timo Werner, Ben Chilwell, Hakim Ziyech and Thiago Silva. Three of them are among the club's top ten signings of all time.

The manager is overloaded with options, and it is difficult to see how they all fit in without holding back some of the talent already at Lampard's disposal – Tammy Abraham, Callum Hudson-Odoi, Mason Mount, et al.

Yet what is more difficult to see – particularly for fans of a certain Premier League rival who were recently admonished under UEFA's Financial Fair Play rules – is how they can afford it. In a year when incomes are significantly down across football, how has Abramovich been able to whip out his chequebook so readily like it's 2003 all over again?

Spoilt for choice... Frank Lampard

Player sales in the last two years have helped to significantly boost the coffers. In addition to Eden Hazard's £89m move to Real Madrid – the highest fee Chelsea have ever received – the Blues also completed the sale of Alvaro Morata to Atletico Madrid this summer for over £50m, while other smaller fees add up to over £40m, including Mario Pasalic joining Atalanta for £13.5m in July, and defenders Ola Aina, Tomas Kalas and David Luiz leaving for around £8m each in 2019.

Player wages have decreased too, thanks to the departures of Willian and Pedro this summer, and ex-captain Gary Cahill joining Crystal Palace last year.

Underpinning all these incomings are the savings they made as a result of last year's transfer ban. The only player they signed in the summer of 2019 was Mateo Kovacic, joining for £40m after his year on loan.

In addition, UEFA have made changes to the implementation of FFP.

Usually when assessing the validity of club finances, the governing body assess three years at a time. However, in 2021, accounts for 2020 will be excluded, and focus solely on 2018 and 2019 instead.

Effectively, Abramovich has capitalised on the relaxing of the rules, and taken the opportunity to steal a march on Chelsea's rivals in the transfer market. In order for the gamble to pay off, Lampard must deliver: failure to qualify for the Champions League cannot be afforded or tolerated. In this season's competition they have to progress in order to achieve a similar financial return as 2019-20, when they earned an estimated £72m for reaching the last 16.

The FA Cup's £3.6m prize pot means that losing another final could be forgiven, but the gap to Liverpool and Manchester City must be closed by the time this year's finances are factored into the 2022 FFP assessments. A Premier League trophy will go a long way towards balancing the books.

Jamie Evans

Breaking through

Nick Bidwell selects the 50 players that could make a name for themselves in this season's Champions League

Nathan Ake
(Manchester City)

Flexibility is a key chapter in the football instruction manual of Pep Guardiola, which is partly why he wanted the 25-year-old Dutchman. As well as excelling at centre-back, don't be surprised to see the £40 million man deliver in a holding midfield role or at left-back.

Faustino Anjorin
(Chelsea)

The Dorset-born attacking midfielder could well be the next luxury model off the Chelsea academy production line. A sight for sore eyes in the technical department, he does not just run with the ball, he glides. Made his first-team debut in the Carabao Cup last season.

Marcos Antonio
(Shakhtar Donetsk)

Talented up-and-coming Brazilian midfielder, 20, with lots of strings to his bow. Disciplined and energetic in a deep-lying enforcer role, an accurate passer and a maker of timely late runs into the opposition box. Previously with Athletico Paranaense and Portuguese outfit Estoril.

Luis Alberto
(Lazio)

When Lazio begin their 2020-21 Champions League campaign, their first appearance in the European showpiece competition in 13 years, no player will be more motivated to make an impact than their elegant Spanish playmaker. Incredibly for someone of his class, he has never set foot on a Champions League pitch and, having just turned 28, he must realise he is approaching now or never territory.

Prior to joining Lazio in 2016, the Luis Alberto story was one of near misses. Despite excelling in a loan spell with Barcelona B in 2012-13, racking up numerous goals and assists in the Segunda Division, the Nou Camp club inexplicably did not trigger the option to buy they had agreed with Sevilla. In three seasons on Liverpool's books he made little headway, only making a dozen appearances before being handed temporary assignments with Malaga and Deportivo.

Now a Spain international and one of the most cultured performers in Serie A – only five players assisted more goals in Europe's top five leagues last season – he himself admits that he let himself down in the early part of his career, that he lacked work ethic and concentration.

A key factor in his belated coming of age is his close relationship with sports psychologist Juan Campillo, who encourages him to banish all negative thoughts.

Mitchel Bakker
(Paris Saint-Germain)

While the 20-year-old Dutch left-back is an unknown among a galaxy of stars at the Parc des Princes, it did not stop him from featuring in PSG's French Cup final victory over Saint-Etienne over the summer. The French treble winners signed him from Ajax in 2019.

Nicolo Barella
(Internazionale)

It matters not that the all-action midfielder has little in the way of Champions League experience (just three starts in total). The 23-year-old is the total package: indefatigable, a superb ball-winner and intelligent in his distribution. He has also improved tactically after playing 41 games in his first year at Inter.

Eduardo Camavinga
(Rennes)

Still only 17, the Ligue 1 defensive midfield marvel is a wise head on the most inexperienced of shoulders. With Real Madrid, PSG and many other top European outfits ready to roll out the red carpet for him, no one would have been shocked if he had moved on this summer. Instead, the teenage sensation has decided to stay put, a decision which speaks volumes for his level-headedness and good old-fashioned patience. His big-money move can wait another year.

After just one full season in the French top flight, it's a little premature for him to fly the Rennes nest, his home for the past seven years. He is guaranteed to start at Rennes, where there's less of a goldfish bowl factor and a great support system around him. As an added bonus, he has the Champions League to look forward to and given his penchant for raising his game on the big occasion, he ought to lap it up.

In August, the Angola-born wonderkid was the youngest player in a France squad for almost 90 years, yet the call-up was far from premature. Camavinga makes it look all so simple – technically way above average, elastically athletic, fearless and a fine reader of the game. He is intelligent off the park too, recently passing his high school examinations (specialising in economics and social science).

> The Angola-born wonderkid was the youngest player in a France squad for almost 90 years

Alessandro Bastoni
(Internazionale)

Last season, Inter coach Antonio Conte came to the conclusion that the Italy Under-21 centre-back was a better option than battle-hardened Uruguay gladiator Diego Godin. Bastoni graduated from the Atalanta academy, arguably the best soccer school in Italy.

Jude Bellingham
(Borussia Dortmund)

Described in the German press as Steven Gerrard or Frank Lampard reincarnate, the 17-year-old former Birmingham City starlet will have to deal with sky-high expectations in his inaugural season in the Ruhr. At €25m, the most expensive teen in Bundesliga history.

Dario Benedetto
(Marseille)

The 30-year-old Argentina international is exactly what the fans at the Stade Velodrome look for in a striker: sharp and precise in the box, direct, hard-working and brimming with character. After 11 goals in his debut season "Dariogol" is keen to impress once again.

Charles De Ketelaere
(Club Brugge)

Following a stint last term as a Champions League novice (one start and three substitute appearances), the 19-year-old attacking midfielder will be expected to shoulder more responsibility in 2020-21. It shouldn't be too much to ask of someone of De Ketelaere's calibre. Although gangly in build, he plays with the soul and instincts of an artist, exemplary in his close control, able to thread a needle with a clever final ball and an audacious dribbler.

The youngster's apparently physical frailty is, in fact, not a weakness at all. Aware that he will come off second-best in direct duels, he has worked out another way to prosper – taking advantage of his great first touch, heads-up awareness and ability to sneak unobtrusively into the red zone.

> Roberto Martinez is already considering inducting him into the Belgium squad

He's had to get used to rave reviews. Ex-Belgium striker Marc Degryse reckons he will be a domestic Player of the Year in the not-so-distant future, while national team boss Roberto Martinez is already considering inducting him into the senior squad. So far, he has impressed for the Under-19s, with two goals in his last three appearances.

For now, his priority is breaking into Brugge's first team. He started eight league matches in 2019-20, and was restricted to substitute appearances in each of their first four league games this season. Coach Philippe Clement is not short of youthful attacking options, with 18-year-old Youssouph Badji scoring twice in four games after arriving from Senegalese side Casa Sports. With De Ketelaere behind him, the Belgian champions have a teenaged attacking duo of significant potential.

Dennis Borkowski
(RB Leipzig)

Prolific for RB's youth team, the teenager signed his first pro contract in May, and made his debut at the end of last season, replacing Timo Werner. Whether he can fill the striker's shoes long term remains to be seen, but under coach Julian Nagelsmann he is sure to improve.

Benjamin Bourigeaud
(Rennes)

Few players in Ligue 1 strike a crisper shot from distance than the ex-Lens midfielder. Versatility is his watchword, comfortable on either flank, in box-to-box mode or sitting in front of the back line. Humble and industrious, the 26-year-old is a great team player.

Marquinhos Cipriano
(Shakhtar Donetsk)

The promising 21-year-old Brazilian started out as a winger in the youth ranks at Sao Paulo, but Ukrainian champions Shakhtar successfully switched him to full-back shortly after signing him in July 2018. With usual left-back Ismaily on the injured list, he is pencilled in to deputise.

Vitali Lisakovich
(Lokomotiv Moscow)

The opportunistic Belarus striker scored his first international goal in September – just a month after joining the Railwaymen from homeland outfit Shakhtyor Soligorsk. Preferred living the Champions League dream at Lokomotiv to a shot at the Belarus title with Soligorsk.

Enzo Crivelli
(Istanbul Basaksehir)

In 12 months, the French target man has traded Ligue 1 relegation with Caen for a leading role in Basaksehir's first league title. The muscular forward can be a little over-zealous in his physical play, and will ruffle the feathers of Champions League defenders.

Merih Demiral
(Juventus)

Last season proved a mix of emotions for the Turkey defender, with the thrill of breaking into Juventus' starting line-up promptly squashed by an ACL injury. Now fit and raring to make up for lost time by putting pressure on the ageing duo of Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini.

Kai Havertz
(Chelsea)

It was an open secret that Havertz, one of the Bundesliga's most influential players over the past couple of seasons, was likely to seek pastures new in 2020-21, and Chelsea – who are seemingly building a new empire under manager Frank Lampard – was the most attractive propostion. Now the pressure is on the Blues' most expensive player of all time to perform – and not many football experts expect him to fail.

On completing his transfer, Chelsea director Marina Granovskaia told the club's website: "Kai is one of the best players of his age in world football, so we are very happy that his future lies at Chelsea." And it is hard to disagree with such bold statements. A total of 29 goals combined in the last two Bundesliga seasons is pretty impressive numbers for a 21-year-old attacking midfielder, not forgetting the fact that Havertz was also Bayer Leverkusen's youngest-ever Bundesliga debutant and goalscorer – and subsequently the youngest player in history to reach the milestone of 50 and then 100 Bundesliga games.

A supremely-gifted player with a keen eye for goal, the Germany international will want to make his mark on the Champions League this season. He's made eight appearances in Europe's showpiece competition so far, but has yet to register a single goal or assist.

Part of an exciting new-look attack at Stamford Bridge this season alongside Timo Werner, Hakim Ziyech and Christian Pulisic, that drought is sure to come to an end.

Mason Greenwood
(Manchester United)

Every now and then, a teenage striker emerges who makes the task of goalscoring seem as simple as ABC. That is the mark of 18-year-old forward Greenwood, who managed an incredible 17 goals in all comps for United last season. He was rewarded with his first England call-up, and made his debut against Iceland in September.

Pape Gueye
(Marseille)

Long-legged former Le Havre midfielder, who could not quite decide whom he wanted to join this summer, initially signing with Watford, then crying foul and plumping for Marseille. Takes inspiration from the technique of Paul Pogba and the ball-winning ability of N'Golo Kante.

Jasurbek Jaloliddinov
(Lokomotiv Moscow)

Russian Premier League runners-up Lokomotiv recently went shopping for talent in Uzbekistan, clinching a deal with Bunyodkor for the skilful 18-year-old winger. The left-footed dribbling machine went on trial with Benevento last year, and made his international debut in February.

Curtis Jones
(Liverpool)

On the evidence of his top-drawer form in his breakthrough campaign for the Reds last season, local lad Jones is a natural, with a wonderful combination of sound decision making, creativity and goalscoring ability. Certain to have more game time in 2020-21.

Yan Couto
(Manchester City)

It says everything about the Guardiola effect and the attractiveness of the City project that they were able to beat the likes of Bayern Munich and Barcelona to the signature of the 18-year-old Coritiba and Brazil right-back. Once settled in, he could create quite a stir.

Ruben Loftus-Cheek
(Chelsea)

As technical as he is powerful, the England box-to-box operative will not be lacking in desire after missing most of last season with a ruptured Achilles tendon. Back in commission, the 24-year-old Londoner has one overriding goal – making the transition from Stamford Bridge impact substitute to starter.

Sergio Lopez
(Real Madrid)

This resourceful, polished graduate of the Real Madrid academy is lined up to be the understudy to first-choice right-back Dani Carvajal. Lopez has made great progress with the reserves and soon may have enough brownie points to truly challenge Carvajal.

Tanguy Nianzou
(Bayern Munich)

Among the best in the business when it comes to evaluating talent, putting together an attractive prospectus and making a player feel wanted, Bayern understandably were delighted to secure the arrival this summer of the up-and-coming French centre-back. And all the more so after picking him up for free from Paris Saint-Germain, persuading the 18-year-old that he would be better served signing his first pro contract at the Allianz Arena. "It came to our attention that he [Nianzou] did not want to carry on his adventure with PSG and when such a promising player looks to further his career abroad, it's logical that a club like ours is interested," Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge explained to *France Football* magazine.

Nianzou – who came out of nowhere to make 13 first-team appearances for PSG last season, including one Champions League start – fits the Bayern bill in every way. These days, Bayern would much rather recruit young guns than spend big on established stars, and as well as being a tower of power in central defence, Nianzou also can carry a load as a midfield enforcer. Bayern think they have brought in a gem and are unafraid to say so. "In our eyes, he's one of the biggest talents in Europe," declared director of sport Hasan Salihamidzic.

Dejan Kulusevski
(Juventus)

After failing to go beyond the last eight of the Champions League in each of the past three seasons, the Old Lady plainly need a reboot and will be banking on the recently-recruited young Sweden winger to play a full part in that repair and resuscitate process.

The word in Italy is that Kulusevski was very close to choosing Internazionale, but Juventus dug deep to get their man. If all the add-on clauses are fulfilled, his former club Atalanta will be €44m richer. Juve, though, will see the hefty fee as the soundest of investments.

Exhibit A: the 20-year-old's scintillating form on loan at Parma last season – scoring ten league goals and assisting eight – which earned him the Serie A Young Player of the Year award.

Exhibit B: his vast untapped potential, nurtured in the Atalanta academy and allowed to flourish on loan at Parma.

> Tremendous versatility, with excellence as a right-winger, number ten or second striker

Exhibit C: his tremendous versatility, with excellence as a right-winger, number ten or second striker.

The early signs are that his new manager, Andrea Pirlo, will utilise Kulusevski on the right side of an attacking trident, either in a 3-4-3 or 4-3-3 formation, cutting inside onto his favoured left foot.

Born in Stockholm to Macedonian parents, he looks to be made of the right mental stuff, too. In his first interview as a Juventus player, he refused to say whether he preferred goals or assists. "Only victories count. I only play to win."

That sort of single-minded clarity goes down very well at Juventus.

Malcom
(Zenit)

To say the least, the Champions League has not been a happy hunting ground for Brazilian winger Malcom, restricted to a bit-part role while at Barcelona in 2018-19 and sidelined by a hip injury at Zenit last season. If he's fit, he should make a huge difference.

Josep Martinez
(RB Leipzig)

RB are only interested in the continent's finest youngsters and such a label definitely applies to the Spain Under-21 goalkeeper, who recently pitched up from second division Las Palmas after learning his craft at Barcelona. Will put pressure on current No.1 Peter Gulacsi.

Sergej Milinkovic-Savic
(Lazio)

The towering Serbia midfielder, affectionately known in the sky blue quarters of Rome as "The Sergeant", represents the meat and potatoes of the Lazio style. Roaming back and forth, he is an all-day presence, offering power, height, drive, range of pass and goal threat.

Lucas Ocampos
(Sevilla)

Little wonder the feisty Argentina winger, 26, is so ebullient at the moment. Last season, his first in Sevilla colours, he enjoyed his best goalscoring campaign since arriving in Europe eight years ago, netting 17 times for the Andalusians.

A quite brilliant mixture of speed, raw-boned presence, cute finishing and gutsy work rate, the 26-year-old is absolutely indispensable to the plans of Sevilla boss Julian Lopetegui. How highly do Sevilla rate him? His €70m release clause should offer a clue.

At Ocampos' other European club postings (Monaco, Marseille, Genoa and Milan), he often struggled for consistency, capable of going from sensational to anonymous in the blink of an eye. Sevilla, however, clearly know how to bring out the best in him.

> "We've woken him up as a goalscorer"
> **Monchi, Sevilla director of sport**

"He's given us the power we badly needed," explained Sevilla director of sport Monchi. "We've woken him up as a goalscorer. Our 4-3-3 system is perfect for him because he can do a lot of damage in the final 25 metres."

Ocampos has already placed himself in Sevilla folklore after producing one of the most heroic performances in La Liga history back in July against Eibar.

Having given his side a one-goal lead, the winger was forced to go in goal for the dying minutes after an injury to goalkeeper Tomas Vaclik. From point-blank range, the stand-in stopper pulled off an outstanding reaction save to give his side the three points.

With more heroics like that, Sevilla may finally have a chance of making their mark on the Champions League, rather than returning to Europa League domination.

Andrey Mostovoy
(Zenit)

Goalscoring left-winger, 22, who is now back at Zenit HQ after an impressive loan stint last season at top-flight Sochi. On Zenit's books since early 2019, he could be extremely valuable coming off the bench. Began scaling the football ladder at Lokomotiv Moscow.

Florian Neuhaus
(Borussia Monchengladbach)

Most German pundits would agree that the 23-year-old Bavarian has developed over the last couple years into one of the most influential midfielders in the country. Plays with the same high-energy levels and spatial awareness as Bayern's Thomas Muller.

Alexander Nubel
(Bayern Munich)

Brought in on a free from Schalke this summer, the 23-year-old is the long-term replacement for first-choice Bayern keeper Manuel Neuer. The German champions will look to bed Nubel in gradually giving him a number of starts per season, including in the Champions League.

Martin Odegaard
(Real Madrid)

After organising a number of loans for the Norway wonderkid – Dutch sides Heerenveen and Vitesse then Real Sociedad – Real finally want him back for good. Superb for Sociedad last term, the Norwegian is tipped to challenge Luka Modric for a starting slot in midfield.

David Okereke
(Club Brugge)

Last season, his first in Belgium following a move from Italian side Spezia, was something of a mixed bag for the Nigeria Under-23 striker: lots of irresistible moments and an equal number of off-days. Can become frustrated, but the raw material is there.

Mohammed Kudus
(Ajax)

Ajax's production line continues to deliver, and if they are not producing the stars within – like Jong Ajax graduates Carel Eiting, Sergino Dest and Ryan Gravenberch – they are signing them. Ghana forward Kudus was acquired in July after a couple of standout seasons with Nordsjaelland.

Riqui Puig
(Barcelona)

Only just turned 21, yet the brilliant little graduate of the Barca academy is already nothing less than a midfield magician. Has been criminally unappreciated by certain coaches at the Nou Camp, but if new boss Ronald Koeman avoids that mistake, he could build a new-look midfield around the Spaniard.

Reinier
(Borussia Dortmund)

Michael Zorc, Dormund's general manager, deserves a medal for concluding a two-year loan deal with Real Madrid for the Brazilian teen sensation. Dortmund know the attacking midfielder from A to Z, having tracked him for two years, and could get the best out of him.

Marcus Thuram
(Borussia Monchengladbach)

The 23-year-old French striker or left-winger swiftly made his presence felt on swapping Breton club Guingamp for Gladbach just over a year ago. Not only was he an instant Bundesliga hit with his explosive blend of muscle, thrust, dribbling skills, strength in the air and marksmanship. He also proved a major emotional leader for the Gladbach camp, enormously self-confident, a strong personality and someone who naturally keeps spirits up in the dressing room.

Despite boasting impeccable football roots – his father is France World Cup-winning defender Lilian Thuram, who reached the Champions League final with Juventus in 2003 – young Marcus was not always seen as a chip off the old block. While at the Sochaux academy, he was often criticised for nonchalance and not putting his height and strength to good use. In Ligue 1 with Guingamp, he regularly overdosed on solo play. Moving to Germany has done him the world of good. He's far more collectively attuned and plays with so much more intensity.

On the eve of his first taste of Champions League football, the stakes are high for him. A good showing could mean a France call-up.

Francisco Trincao
(Barcelona)

Barcelona's newly-acquired Portugal winger, who won his first senior cap in September and was snapped up from Braga for €31 million, faces the ultimate test of his mettle in the Catalan capital this season.

Arriving at a time of marked crisis at the Nou Camp – results falling off a cliff, the club's finances in a sorry state and civil war breaking out – poor Trincao arguably could not have chosen a worse moment to join the *Blaugrana*. He will have to be mentally tough to survive this trial by fire.

What's not in question is the youngster's sumptuous ability: his velvety touch on the ball, mesmerising trickery, quick wits and a flair for spectacular goals, invariably cutting in from the right to unleash a pot-shot with his preferred left foot. Last season, he was an attacking whirlwind for Braga, scoring eight league goals and assisting six, and turning in a Man of the Match performance against Slovan Bratislava in the Europa League, scoring one and setting up another.

In a rare moment of foresight, Barca sealed his transfer back in January before allowing him to see out the campaign with Braga. Given their poor record in the transfer market over recent season, there will be significant pressure on Trincao to buck the trend.

Diogo Leite
(Porto)

Heralded as Portugal's next great centre-back, Leite has already been endorsed by one of his predecessors, Pepe, who claims he is "the best central defender in Portugal". Strong showings in this season's Champions League could soon catapult him into national team contention.

Xavi Simons
(Paris Saint-Germain)

The midfield prodigy has the world at his feet. Represented by super-agent Mino Raiola, who played his part in luring the young Dutchman away from Barcelona controversially last year. The subject of lots of hype, much of it justified, but faces a challenge to break into PSG's midfield ahead of more seasoned pros.

Marco Sportiello
(Atalanta)

With usual No.1 Pierluigi Gollini sidelined with torn cruciate ligaments, Atalanta coach Gian Piero Gasperini will put his faith in back-up Sportiello, formerly on loan at Fiorentina and Frosinone. He filled in ably for the ill-fated Champions League quarter-final loss to PSG.

Suso
(Sevilla)

The Spain attacker has played for European giants Liverpool and Milan, yet remarkably has zero Champions League experience. Julen Lopetegui was his boss with various Spanish youth teams, and made him a key figure in last season's Europa League run-in.

Bosko Sutalo
(Atalanta)

For many observers of the Croatian football scene, the 20-year-old ex-Osijek stopper is by far the best young defender in the country. Headhunted by Atalanta in January for €5m, Sutalo says he models his game on Real Madrid and Spain back-line rock Sergio Ramos.

Edin Visca
(Istanbul Basaksehir)

The Bosnia winger, a regular at newly-crowned Turkish champions for almost a decade, didn't put a foot wrong in 2019-20, supplying 13 goals and as many assists. When he is on his game, so are Basaksehir. Has flown under the radar so far, but that could change this season.

Vitolo
(Atletico Madrid)

A three-time Europa League winner with Sevilla, the Spanish international wide-man could prove a more than useful joker in the top continental competition. Atletico coach Diego Simeone has a lot of respect for his elusiveness and strong hold-up play.

Brandon Williams
(Manchester United)

The left-back put in 36 solid displays for the Red Devils last term, proof that the homegrown 19-year-old is on the right path. So mature, so driven that he effectively by-passed reserve team football, and recently penned a new deal, keeping him at the Old Trafford club until 2024.

Kostas Tsimikas
(Liverpool)

He's completed the hard yards, refining and honing his craft at mother club Olympiakos, and spending time on loan at Esbjerg in Denmark and Dutch side Willem II. Now for his well-deserved entrance onto the main stage on Merseyside, a chance for the impressive young Greek left-back to really make a name for himself, and gain global exposure and recognition.

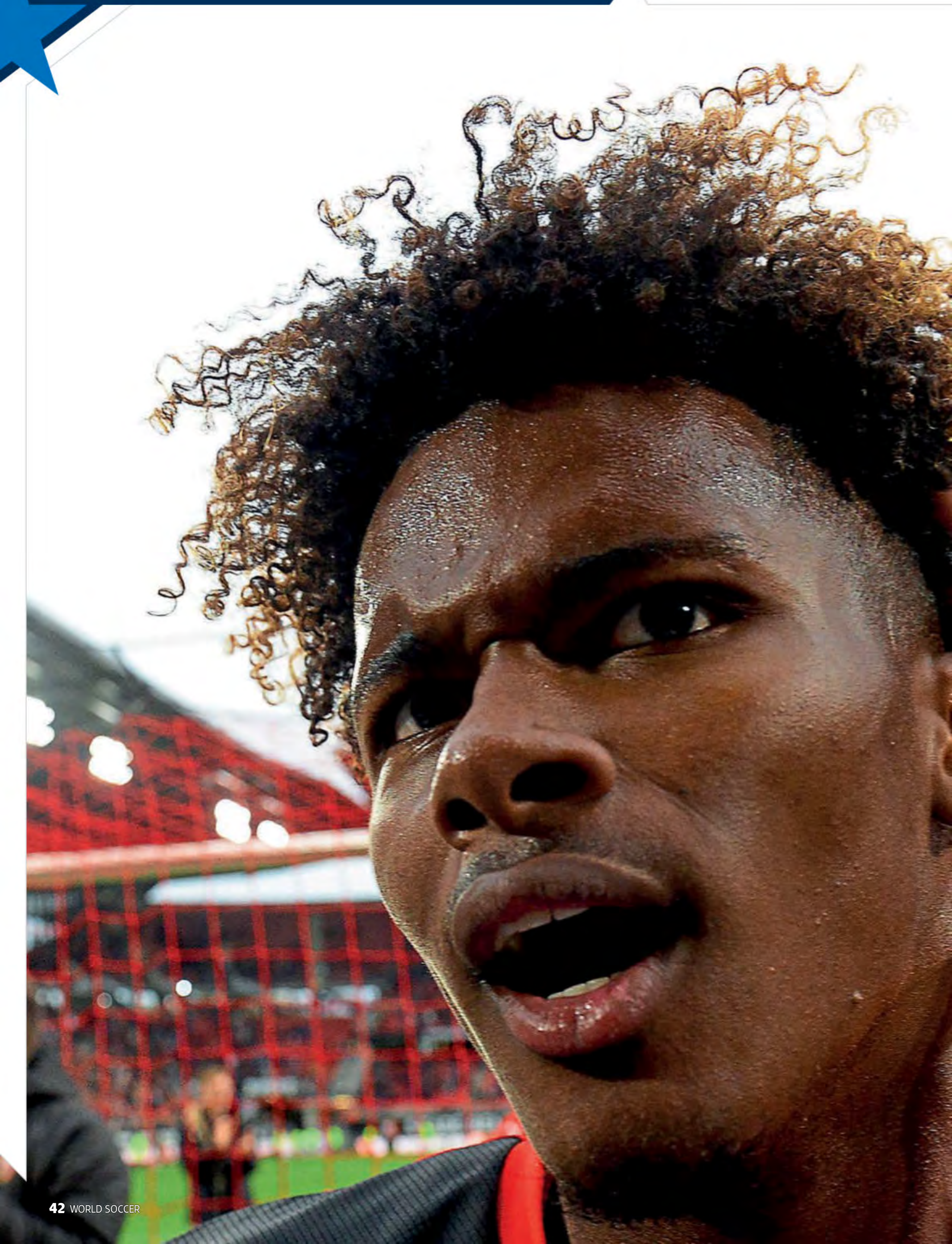
The Thessaloniki-born international, an £11.7 million purchase from Olympiakos, ostensibly will be the understudy to the inimitable Andy Robertson. But that does not mean that the Anfield new boy will be twiddling his thumbs most matchdays. Even a player of Robertson's rare stamina has to have a breather every so often, and the 24-year-old will be on hand to take the baton.

> Tsimikas has the physical capacity to bomb forward all day...plus the ability to whip in a great cross

Tsimikas has the physical capacity to bomb forward all day, the mentality and skills of a winger, plus the ability to whip in a great cross. Irreverent, adventurous as well as defensively resilient.

The move to Liverpool is not Tsimikas' first spell away from Greece. In 2016-17 he joined Danish side Esbjerg on loan, then spent a season in the Netherlands with Willem II, where he showed off his attacking credentials in the Eredivisie by scoring six goals.

In his native land, he is often compared to the former Olympiakos, Internazionale and Greece left-back Grigoris Georgatos, who a couple of decades ago was one of the most accomplished attacking full-backs in Europe. It's no coincidence that Georgatos used to be Tsimikas' coach for the Olympiakos youth team.



10 to answer

Nick Bidwell poses ten questions that need answering in this season's Champions League campaign

1. *Can Ligue 1 keep up the pace?*

With Paris Saint-Germain finishing runners-up to Bayern Munich and Lyon confounding all expectations to reach the semi-finals, 2019-20 was a rare season of glory for French sides in the Champions League. The pressure is now on the Ligue 1 brethren not to slip back into their old semi-detached ways.

Given their financial muscle, and the depth of stellar talent in the French capital in the likes of Kylian Mbappe, Neymar, Mauro Icardi, Angel Di Maria, Marco Verratti and Marquinhos, PSG are sure to be contenders again. But what of the other Gallic participants?

Marseille, winners of this competition in its inaugural season as the "Champions League" in 1992-93 and runners-up in Ligue 1 last term, are not in the best of shape. They are in debt to the tune of €90 million; a large number of their fans are openly hostile to club movers and shakers (American owner Frank McCourt and president Jacques-Henri Eyraud), and the off-season has been a period of wall-to-wall instability – the sacking of director of sport Andoni Zubizarreta; head coach Andre Villas-Boas close to quitting in protest before being talked round; daily rumours of a possible takeover, the list of would-be buyers including a Saudi prince, a former French boxer and a Tunisian businessman.

The pressure is now on the Ligue 1 brethren not to slip back into their old ways

Looking to reduce their balance sheet arrears by two-thirds, Marseille have resigned themselves to offloading one or two of their best players. Thankfully their number one creator Dimitri Payet will not be heading for the door, having extended his contract – albeit with a 50 per cent pay cut – while they have signed some top young talents in Pape Gueye and Leonardo Balerdi.

The contrast with Rennes is significant, and not just in terms of European experience. The Champions League first-timers are much more buoyant going into the new season, with bright young coach Julian Stephan assembling a formidable unit. They reached the Europa League round of 16 in 2018-19, beat PSG in the French Cup final a few weeks later and achieved their best-ever Ligue 1 finish last term (third). They are a team who fights until the death, too – last season they picked up no fewer than 11 points from goals scored in the 89th minute and beyond.

2. *Can former star players fit as head coaches?*

In appointing Andrea Pirlo and Ronald Koeman to run their respective first teams, Barcelona and Juventus basically are playing the populist card, banking on the return of iconic playing figures to spark similar amounts of success in the technical area.

There's a great deal of precedent and logic to the idea. Pep Guardiola and Zinedine Zidane both managed to create golden dynasties on their old Barcelona and Real Madrid stomping grounds. Neither Pirlo nor Koeman will have to waste time finding their bearings and know exactly what the culture and the expectations are. Nor are the pair likely to have any problems in the dressing room; players tend to have instant respect for high achievers. Supporters invariably embrace such appointments, excited by the reappearance of much-loved idols.

There are snags however. Pirlo, for example, has never coached at any level, only granted his UEFA pro licence earlier this summer. Once a thoroughbred deep-lying playmaker, he repeatedly showcased the finest of tactical brains. So wouldn't he have been better served with a coaching apprenticeship somewhere less taxing? Learning on the job – and even more so in a high-profile post – comes with clear risks.

Ronald Koeman will always be a Nou Camp VIP for his bullet free-kick against Sampdoria in Barca's first-ever European Cup victory at Wembley in 1992. But that will not make his new role any easier. Barcelona are in a mess from top to bottom and while Koeman has done an excellent job of late with the Netherlands national team, he has had his sub-par moments in club management, particularly at Benfica, Valencia and Everton. He is not the Messiah.

Guardiola and Zidane both managed to create golden dynasties on their old Barca and Real stomping grounds

It may well be the case that that Koeman turns out to merely be a seat-warmer. Presidential elections are scheduled for next March and most of the candidates are promising to give the head coaching reins to legendary Camp Nou midfielder and skipper Xavi, who currently is working in Qatar. That leaves Koeman with very little time to clear out the dead wood and recalibrate.

3. *Will Istanbul Basaksehir make the weight?*

The Basaksehir outfit, recently crowned Turkish champions for the first time in their history, will be keen to mark their inaugural Champions League campaign with a scalp or two. Wishful thinking perhaps? The slow pace of the Super Lig is not the best of training grounds, so they can be vulnerable to teams who play with physicality and high tempo.

4. *Who will the neutrals pull for?*

Atalanta would be a good choice. The Bergamo club have much to commend them: they play high-quality attacking football thanks to the tactical wiles of coach Gian Piero Gasperini, whose fluid 3-5-2 system is a work of art. Located in a city terribly affected by COVID-19, they need all the backing they can get.

5. *Where will the goals flow the most?*

Prepare yourselves for a Dortmund firework display. Apart from Liverpool, there is no better team in Europe at exploding forward from deep positions. So many attacking weapons, with new Brazilian signing Reinier joining Jadon Sancho, Thorgan Hazard, Julian Brandt, plus the biggest gun of all in prolific striker Erling Haaland.

6. *How will Ronald Koeman pull Barcelona out of the mire?*

A good start would be to switch from the Catalan side's usual 4-3-3 to a 4-2-3-1. This tweak would allow Koeman to use Dutch midfielder Frenkie de Jong in his favourite role as one of two pivots in front of the backline. De Jong is at his best picking the ball up from the centre-backs and advancing with it.

7. *Any chance of an Eastern uprising?*

Back in the mists of time, it was no rare occurrence for an Eastern European team to make a splash in the continent's most prestigious competition. CSKA Sofia (1982) and Dynamo Kiev (1999) were worthy semi-finalists, while Steaua Bucharest (1986) and Red Star Belgrade (1991) even had the temerity to win the crown outright.

Now, it's an entirely different ball game. Outfits from England, Spain, Germany, Italy and France call the shots.

One only has to look at the poor showing of the Eastern contingent in recent times. In each of the past four seasons, only one team (Shakhtar in 2017-18) has made it through to the knockout stage and results in the group phase last term were especially unedifying, with the likes of Shakhtar, Dinamo Zagreb, Lokomotiv Moscow, Zenit, Red Star Belgrade and Slavia Prague recording just six victories between them.

Which of the Eastern sides are the most likely to still be standing next spring? Shakhtar, seem the best equipped, blessed with a swathe of top-class Brazilians and led by a very smart tactician and team-builder in the Portuguese Luis Castro. The Miners might have shown their limitations when thumped 5-0 by Internazionale in a Europa League semi-final in August, but generally have a good track record of springing surprises. Last season, they were good enough to hold Manchester City 1-1 at the Etihad Stadium and pulled off a great 2-1 win at eventual quarter-finalists Atalanta.

Russian champions Zenit may have a number of trump cards to play too. They have the cutting edge infrastructure, the financial backing of the Gazprom energy giants and a squad that is qualitatively and quantitatively fit for purpose. Coach Sergei Semak, once a stylish Russian international midfielder, deserves much praise, not only for assembling a well-balanced, tactically-aware line-up, but also for rooting out the dressing room cliques which regularly undermined the cause.

Semak's latest experiment involves deploying nominal Brazilian winger Malcom as a 'nine-and-a-half' behind twin-strikers Artem Dzyuba and Sardar Azmoun.

8. *Can Benzema stay as sharp?*

There's absolutely no reason to believe that Real Madrid's French frontman will lose his taste for Champions League end-product. His record is extraordinary: 65 goals in total for Lyon and Real in the competition and at least four strikes in every one of his last ten Champions League campaigns.

9. *Will Ajax repeat their heroics of 2018-19?*

Probably not. Many of that platinum generation (Matthijs de Ligt, Frenkie de Jong, Hakim Ziyech) have left for pastures new. While they do have an exciting new crop of youngsters in midfielder Ryan Gravenberch, forward Mohammed Kudus and new Brazilian frontrunner Antony, they are not sufficiently ripe to take Europe by storm.

10. *Italy's next top coach?*

Despite a marked shortage of squad options, Lazio's Simone Inzaghi managed to wring every last drop of value from the players at his disposal in 2019-20. His side was always meticulously organised and his matchday strategies more often than not worked a treat. Few teams in Europe are better than Lazio at setting up for shots on goal.

TRAIL BLAISE

This summer, Blaise Matuidi became David Beckham's first high profile signing at Inter Miami, after years of proving his critics wrong

Words: Nick Bidwell

What's 4,500 miles between friends? France national team coach Didier Deschamps saw no reason to fret on hearing in August that one of his favourite players, 33-year-old midfield warhorse Blaise Matuidi, had left Juventus on a free transfer for a new adventure with David Beckham's Inter Miami.

Some assumed that Matuidi's long and distinguished international career – one spanning a decade, 84 caps and a World Cup triumph at Russia 2018 – was automatically over. True, Deschamps did not include the midfielder in his squad to face Sweden and Croatia in the UEFA Nations League in September, but the France boss isn't ready to put the veteran out to pasture just yet.

Speaking at his press conference after naming his 23-man squad, Deschamps said: "I spoke with Blaise, who called me to update me before it was official. I will not go into the content of our discussions, but he is lucid enough to know that this complicates the situation with the France team. That doesn't mean he won't come back. He remains selectable...I do not forget what he did for the France team, but he is lucid to know that there is competition. I'm not going to say it's over, but we'll see on a case-by-case basis."

Although he won't say it publicly, Deschamps probably wishes that Matuidi had waited one more year

Martial

for his Atlantic crossing. The midfielder is more than just a key player in France's plans for next summer's Euros – he boasts all the traits Deschamps admires in a player: a disciplined warrior with boundless enthusiasm, mobility, consistency and positive influence in the dressing room. Matuidi has never disappointed Deschamps.

Ever since Deschamps took over as the boss of *Les Bleus* in the summer of 2012, Matuidi has invariably been slap bang at the heart of his plans. In all that time, Deschamps' faith in him has rarely wavered. The French coach omitted him from the starting line-up of France's World Cup 2018 opener against Australia, but soon would regret his choice. In an unconvincing 2-1 win over the Socceroos, Matuidi's replacement, Corentin Tolisso of Bayern Munich, was arguably the worst player on the pitch. A rethink was urgently required.

For France's next group game versus Peru, Deschamps tore up the script. The 4-3-3 template was scrapped in favour of a 4-2-3-1 and in a surprising move, Matuidi was selected as a left-sided midfielder. Normally deployed in national team colours as a box-to-box dynamo or ball-winning enforcer, Matuidi's selection initially sparked no end of controversy. The consensus of opinion in pundit circles and on social media was that he was stealing the spot of a genuine ball-playing winger.

In fact, it turned out to be a masterstroke. Matuidi embedded himself in the team for the knockout stages, giving France an altogether more balanced look. Clearly not as spectacular or audacious as romantics would have liked, but a godsend in terms of muscular impact and substance. Matuidi was the living, breathing embodiment of the Deschamps philosophy. Fiercely competitive, powerful, hard-running and always ready to intelligently tuck in, allowing the likes of Griezmann and Mbappe to shine.

"He (Matuidi) brings much equilibrium to the team," explained Deschamps. "He is very effective, and plays with oomph. He covers a lot of ground, is an intense competitor and runs all day. He does his job at a very high level. He's an important part of our defensive solidity. All great teams have this and that's our strength."

His massive contribution to France's second world title effectively silenced

Winner...Matuidi gets his hands on the World Cup trophy

Legion of Honour...the French players were honoured for their World Cup victory

the critics who used to pour scorn on his alleged technical limitations. At times, he has needed a thick skin and this certainly was the case during a notoriously virulent national team press conference in October 2017. Asked to comment on suggestions in the media that he was not "skilful enough and had square feet," he remarkably managed to laugh it off.

"You're mean to say that," he retorted. "In spite of my feet, I've played for France and two big clubs in Paris Saint-Germain and Juventus. I think I've proved my quality. There's nothing trivial in that. If, as you say, there's such a debate about me, I would have been forced out of the national team a long time ago. The French team is a very strong one, there's a lot of competition for places and it's that which forces you to improve. I had six years with PSG, where I played regularly. It's been going well at Juve too. What's important is what happens on the pitch and my coaches have been happy with me."

One can become bogged down solely focusing on Matuidi the destroyer, pressing machine and ball-winner. While he could never be described as a cultured creator, he is anything but a dud when it comes to driving forward and breaking lines. He has netted nine times for France and some of his goalscoring work has been of the highest order. The best examples? A marvellous overhead kick – executed with his weaker right foot – in a friendly victory over Netherlands in March 2014; a brace in a 2-1 win against Serbia in September 2015, including a magnificent first-time volley measured at over 100 km/h; spectacularly lashing home from an acute angle as Bulgaria were seen off in a World Cup 2018 qualifier in Sofia, the only goal of a hard-fought encounter.

Don't exclusively think of Matuidi as one-dimensional, argues Deschamps: "He can be important in an attacking sense. If you look at the World Cup in Russia, he was just as likely to come up with a final ball as to provide the penultimate pass in a move."

Jean-Marc Furlan, the coach who handed the then 17-year-old Matuidi his pro baptism for Troyes in November 2005, has an interesting theory. He thinks Blaise always had it in him to be much more than a water carrier: "With us at Troyes (2004-07) and then at Saint-Etienne, he spent years serving the cause," Furlan explained to *Eurosport* in 2014. "He sacrificed himself for more basic tasks. Nowadays he plays alongside individuals of equivalent calibre and he can express himself

Trusted...Deschamps and Matuidi at the 2018 World Cup

> "[Matuidi] brings much equilibrium to the team… He covers a lot of ground, is an intense competitor and runs all day…All great teams have this, and that's our strength"
>
> **Didier Deschamps, France coach**

Celebration... Mbappe and Matuidi

Timeline

NOV 23, 2004

Plays his first senior game, completing 60 minutes of Troyes' 2-1 victory over Ligue 2 rivals Gueugnon.

JUL 30, 2005

Following Troyes' promotion to Ligue 1, Matuidi is also promoted from the reserves and starts his first top-flight match.

Send-off...Matuidi's final game for Juve was against Roma

more. He does things that I used to see him execute at Troyes. He has the same ability to take on and beat opponents as Jean Tigana. We used to give new arrivals at Troyes a DVD of great goals scored by ex-players here. One of the clips selected was a 25-metre shot by Matuidi."

The moral of the Matuidi narrative is a basic one – don't underestimate him, don't ever write him off. Tagged as yesterday's man when dropped by new PSG coach Unai Emery early in the 2016-17 season, he was back in the fold within weeks. Better than ever. On swapping PSG for Juventus the following summer in a €20 million deal, many naysayers in France predicted tough times ahead for him in Turin. How wrong they were; Juve coach Massimiliano Allegri was a member of his fan club from the off.

Throughout the 2018 World Cup, much was made of Matuidi apparently playing out of position on the left side of midfield. In truth, he was far from flying blind. He had occupied that spot on several previous occasions for both PSG and Juve. He proved particularly impressive wide on the left in PSG's games with Arsenal in the 2016-17 Champions League group phase.

So adaptable is he, you could call him Inspector Gadget. During his time with Saint-Etienne, he often stole the show as an attack-conscious left-back and caught the eye in the same role for Juve last season, splendidly responding to an emergency call from coach Maurizio Sarri. In the first half of France's round of 16 victory over the Republic of Ireland at Euro 2016, he unexpectedly popped up in a right-sided midfield slot and his old Juventus boss Allegri repeatedly suggested that he would make a fine centre-back.

> The moral of the Matuidi narrative is a basic one – don't underestimate him, don't ever write him off

Even in his formative football years, he rang the positional changes. At his first proper club, US Fontenay – his team as an infant and junior school pupil – Blaise turned out on the wing

JAN 11, 2006
Scores his first-ever professional goal with a well-taken volley, sealing a 1–0 victory against Lille.

AUG 15, 2006
Earns his first France U21s call-up under coach Rene Girard, appearing as a half-time substitute against Belgium.

JUL 12, 2007
Following Troyes' Ligue 1 relegation, Matuidi joins Saint-Etienne, making his club debut against Valenciennes on August 11.

SEP 18, 2008
Plays in European competition for the first time, starting in a UEFA Cup tie with Israeli side Hapoel Tel Aviv.

AUG 8, 2009
Named Saint-Etienne captain by manager Alain Perrin, after an injury to regular skipper Loic Perrin.

MAY 18, 2010
Involved in an on-field clash with team-mate Dimitri Payet, resulting in the future West Ham star striking Matuidi.

AUG 5, 2010
Receives his first call-up to the France squad, making his debut off the bench a month later in a 2–0 win over Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Starting out...Matuidi at Troyes

Taking on...Matuidi joined Saint-Etienne in 2007

or as a No.10. He only was shifted to a defensive midfield brief at the age of 15, towards the end of a stint at the French national academy at Clairefontaine, where he trained from 2000 to 2003.

"He has the gift of being very good in different positions," his Saint-Etienne coach Christophe Galtier told *Le Dauphine* newspaper back in 2010. "That's quite an asset. There's a big difference between a fill-in player and one who is indispensable to the team. Blaise is the latter."

Born in Toulouse but schooled in the Paris dormitory suburb of Fontenay-sous-Bois, Blaise is the youngest of five children. His parents, father Faria Rivelino and mother Elise, both hailed from the war-torn southern African republic of Angola and anxious for a better, more secure life, took the decision to emigrate to Europe in 1983, first settling in Belgium, then moving to France, where Faria worked in clothes manufacturing and in the airport business.

There were few signs in Blaise's early life of the treasure trove of sporting success which would come his way: World Cup gold in 2018, a runners-up medal from Euro 2016, four Ligue 1 titles with PSG, three Serie A crowns at Juventus and the French Player of the Year award in 2015. For one thing, he was a rather sickly child, beset by kidney and urinary difficulties. As a toddler, he also came within a whisker of a grim end, climbing out of a window of his family's seventh-floor flat in Toulouse and only saved in the nick of time by a saving tackle from his uncle.

He caught the football bug from his two elder brothers Emmanuel and Junior. As soon as young Blaise could walk, all he ever wanted to do was emulate his ball-playing siblings and it was only a matter of time before he was allowed to join the kick-about fun at the foot of the estate tower blocks in Fontenay, normally up against much older kids. The play area might have been rough concrete but at least it was painted green.

Three figures played a crucial part in nurturing and shaping his nascent talents: his first coaches with the US Fontenay schoolboys, Juan Ruiz and the late Jacques Zilberschlag, taught him the fundamentals of the game, and Laurent Piombo, a regional French federation rep, who guided him at the Vincennes and Creteil clubs. "He used to cry when we lost," recalls Ruiz. "He was a shy kid but adorable. On the field, though, he was a winner. Even as a boy, he was dynamic. Physically well-coordinated and good on the ball."

Encouraged by Piombo, he took and

Mentor...Saint-Etienne coach Christophe Galtier

JUL 25, 2011
Joins PSG after four seasons at Saint-Etienne, signing on the same day as Jeremy Menez and Milan Bisevac.

MAY 9, 2012
Named in France's Euro 2012 squad – his first major tournament – but doesn't play a single match due to injury.

MAY 24, 2013
Named in the Ligue 1 Team of the Year after missing just one game and winning his first league title.

NOV 19, 2013
Plays in France's 3-0 win v Ukraine, thus recovering from a 2-0 first-leg defeat and qualifying for the 2014 World Cup.

Silverware...The midfielder won five trophies in Italy

Accolade...Matuidi was French Player of the Year in 2015

passed the Clairefontaine entrance examination at the age of 13. Only the very best young French players gain admittance, and soon he was attracting big-name admirers, not least a certain Pep Guardiola, according to former Clairefontaine coach Francisco Filho: "I was with the Clairefontaine team for a tournament in Las Palmas in the Canary Islands," Filho told *Radio Monte Carlo* last year. "While there I got to know Pep Guardiola, who was on holiday at the time. He was still a player then in Qatar. One night we were having dinner together and he asked who our number six was. He said he liked him a lot and that as a coach, he'd love a player like that. You know who he was talking about? Blaise Matuidi."

> "[Pep Guardiola] asked who our number six was. He said he liked him a lot and that as a coach, he'd love a player like that. You know who he was talking about? Blaise Matuidi"
>
> **Francisco Filho, Former Clairefontaine coach**

Rather peculiarly, Blaise was not exactly inundated with job offers on graduating from the national academy in 2003. Negotiations with Lyon went awry and he had to search high and low for an employer. Eventually, he penned an apprenticeship deal with second division Troyes, where head coach Jean-Marc Furlan quickly transformed him from a youth-team wannabe to first-team mainstay. "I owe Jean-Marc Furlan a lot," says Matuidi. "Where I am today is thanks to him."

With Troyes and then Saint-Etienne, he went from strength to strength, not only earning rave reviews for his "Marathon Man" efforts as a defensive midfielder, but also praised for his fair play, for rarely resorting to illegality. Full of energy and clean combativeness, his modus operandi was to stick like glue to an opponent. Hence the nickname "Chewing Gum", conceived by France national team colleague Samir Nasri.

He was now very much on his way. At Troyes, he became a French U21 international. In September 2010, while at Saint-Etienne, he won his first full cap, appearing as a substitute in a Euro 2012 qualifier against Bosnia in Sarajevo.

It was almost inevitable that he would join Paris Saint-Germain, signing for them for a fee of around €8m in July 2011. He had been a PSG fan since childhood – especially revering Nigerian dribbler extraordinaire Jay-Jay Okocha – and might even have joined them in his early teens. Invited to play for PSG in a prestigious Under-12 tournament, he had the chance to definitively sign on. Instead he plumped for the Clairefontaine experience.

Choices, choices and up to now, Matuidi has been proved right on every single career call. Slowly but surely, he has managed, in his own words, "to reach the roof of the world." Driven and never satisfied, it's not in his nature to resort to half-measures. He'll be striving just as hard in the MLS with Inter Miami. You can count on it.

Reunion...Matuidi played alongside Beckham at PSG

MAY 13, 2014
Named in Didier Deschamps' squad for the 2014 World Cup, starting every match and scoring in the 5-2 win over Switzerland.

MAY 12, 2016
Named in Didier Deschamps 23-man squad for Euro 2016 on home soil. Plays every match, including the final.

AUG 18, 2017
Joins Juventus on a three-year contract, making his debut the next day in 3-0 home win over Cagliari.

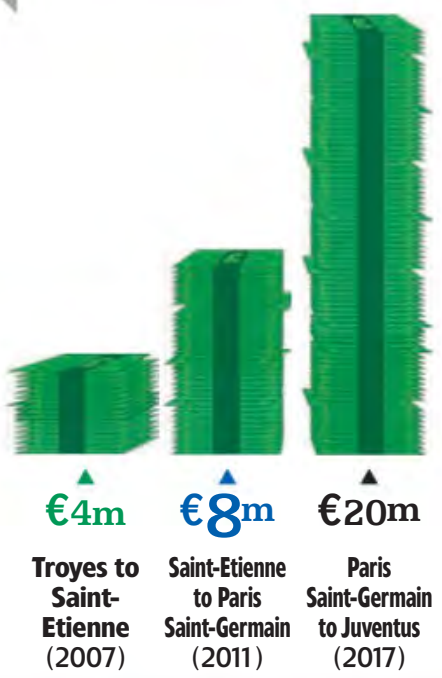
JUL 15, 2018
Starts the World Cup final as France lift the trophy with a 4-2 victory against Croatia.

AUG 13, 2020
Signs for MLS club Inter Miami on a free transfer, after Juventus agree to terminate his contract.

Blaise Matuidi

the numbers game

TRANSFER FEES



FRANCE

84
CAPS

GOALS
9

DESCHAMPS CAPS

Player	Caps under Deschamps
Olivier Giroud	90
Blaise Matuidi	**80**
Antoine Griezmann	80
Hugo Lloris	79
Paul Pogba	69

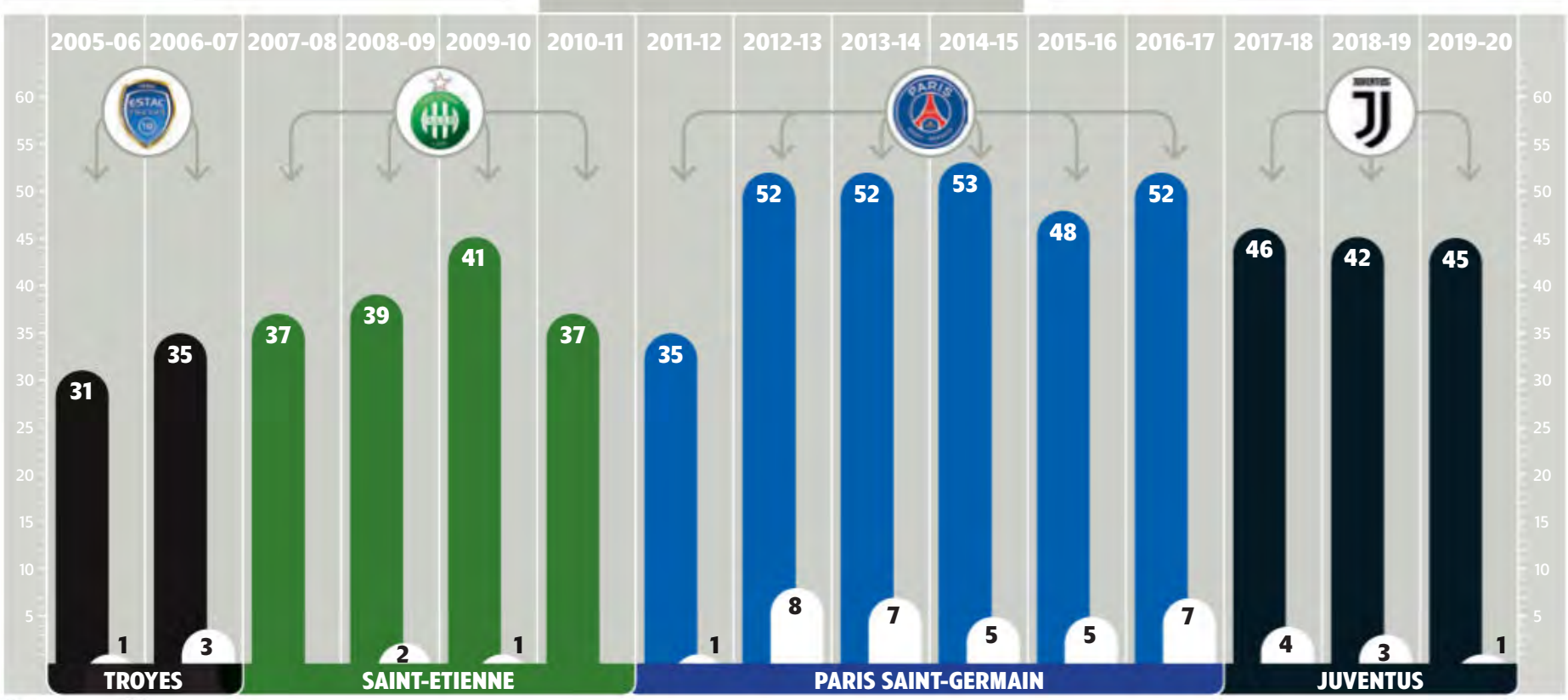
MLS WORLD CUP WINNERS

1

Matuidi will be the only World Cup winner in this season's Major League Soccer

FRENCH PLAYER OF THE YEAR

HONOURS



GAMES GOALS *(up to & inc 07.08.20)*

Gutted...A young fan holds his head as Messi fails to report for training

The saga

WORDS Sid Lowe

Lionel Messi's transfer request triggered one of the biggest sagas in the history of football. Sid Lowe tells the story of how it all played out

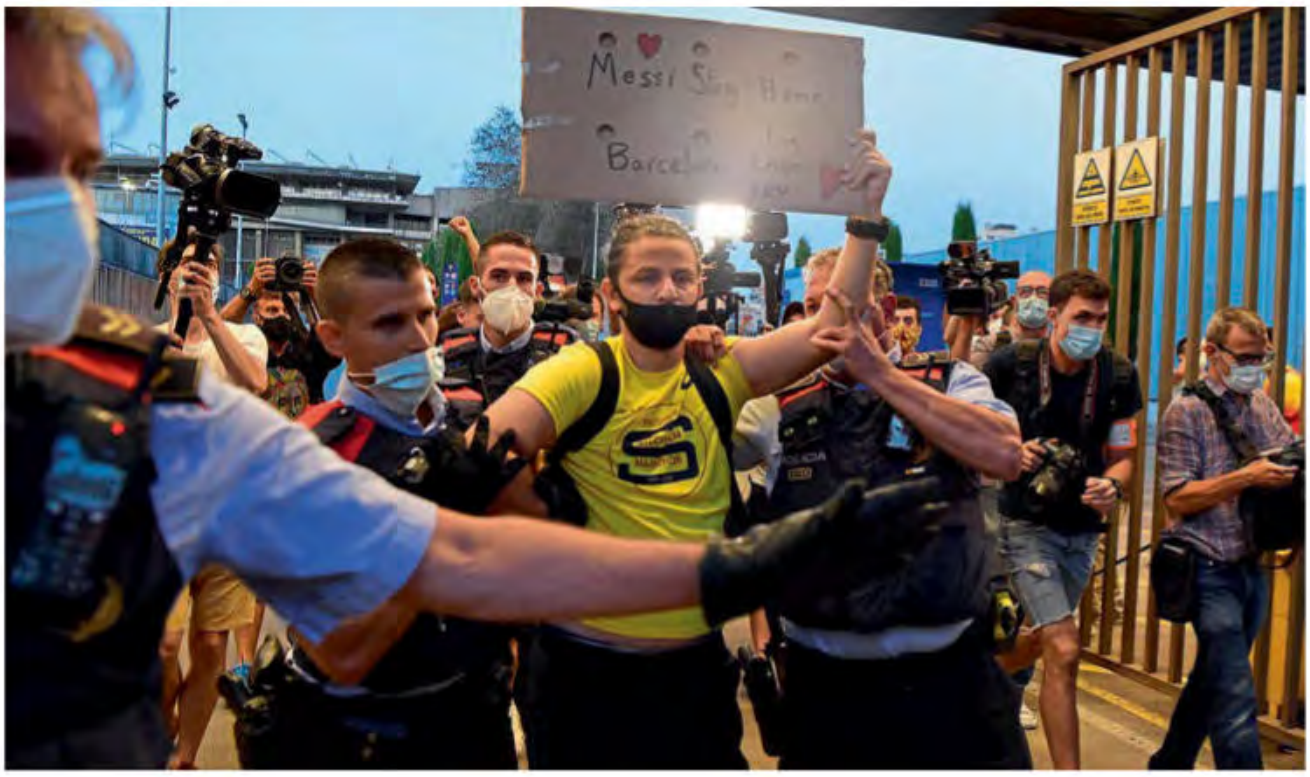
Just after 7pm on August 25, someone from the post office turned up at FC Barcelona's reception on Aristides Maillol Street alongside the Nou Camp. Dressed in bright yellow and blue, they were carrying the letter that would change everything – except the thing it was actually trying to change. Taken inside, it was handed over and signed for, meaning there was now no way that anyone at the Catalan club could just ignore it and hope that the terrible news contained within would just go away.

The "burofax" – a kind of recorded delivery and new word that everyone now knows, so huge did this story become – formally served notice of Lionel Messi's intention to leave Barcelona after 20 years at the club. He had arrived as a kid, just turned 13 and always said that he wanted to end his career there, but now he had changed his mind. At 33, having scored more goals and won more trophies than anyone else ever, having become the best player in their history, he wanted to go.

And he wanted to go for free.

Not only that: Messi insisted that he was entitled to leave for free. In fact, it was not so much that he was announcing his intention to go, it was that he was announcing that he had already gone, per a clause in his contract that allowed him to take the unilateral decision to leave. Barcelona could not stop him, nor demand a transfer fee for him. Never mind the €700m buyout clause – that no longer applied. His price was zero. All he had to do was communicate that to them at the end of the season.

Messi would later insist that he had told the president repeatedly of his intention to depart over the course of the season but that he kept getting put off. He said he had been told that, yes, they would deal with this – just not now. Of course he could go, he says he was told: he had earned that. But when it came to it, the president, Josep Maria ▸



Outcry...Fans gathered outside the Nou Camp to protest Bartomeu's presidency

Bartomeu, "broke his word." Delivering a burofax in August was a way of communicating his decision formally.

Formally and legally, in fact: this was now admissible in court, if it came to it. Messi had served notice via a document that was stamped, dated and signed for. He was no longer a Barcelona player. Within an hour, though, Barcelona had sent a burofax back saying: "Yes, you are." In their response, the club insisted that they wanted Messi to stay and lead a new generation and a new team under coach Ronald Koeman. They informed him that he remained under contract and should he walk away they would demand the €700m stipulated in his release clause.

How could their positions be so different? Simple, really. According to the deal that Messi signed in 2017, at the end of every season he could walk away for free. All he had to do was communicate that decision by June 10. He had done that now. The problem was it was August 25.

Messi's lawyers argued that because of the extraordinary nature of the season, that date should be postponed, pushed back until competition was completed. The letter of the law was one thing, the spirit of it another. As he would later say: how could he formally communicate his intention to leave on June 10 when at that point Barcelona were still playing for the league title and hadn't even restarted the Champions League yet?

A legal battle had been set up with an uncertain conclusion, although everyone knew the date on the clause was likely to be binding. In any case, court cases are slow – too slow to resolve something like this during a transfer window.

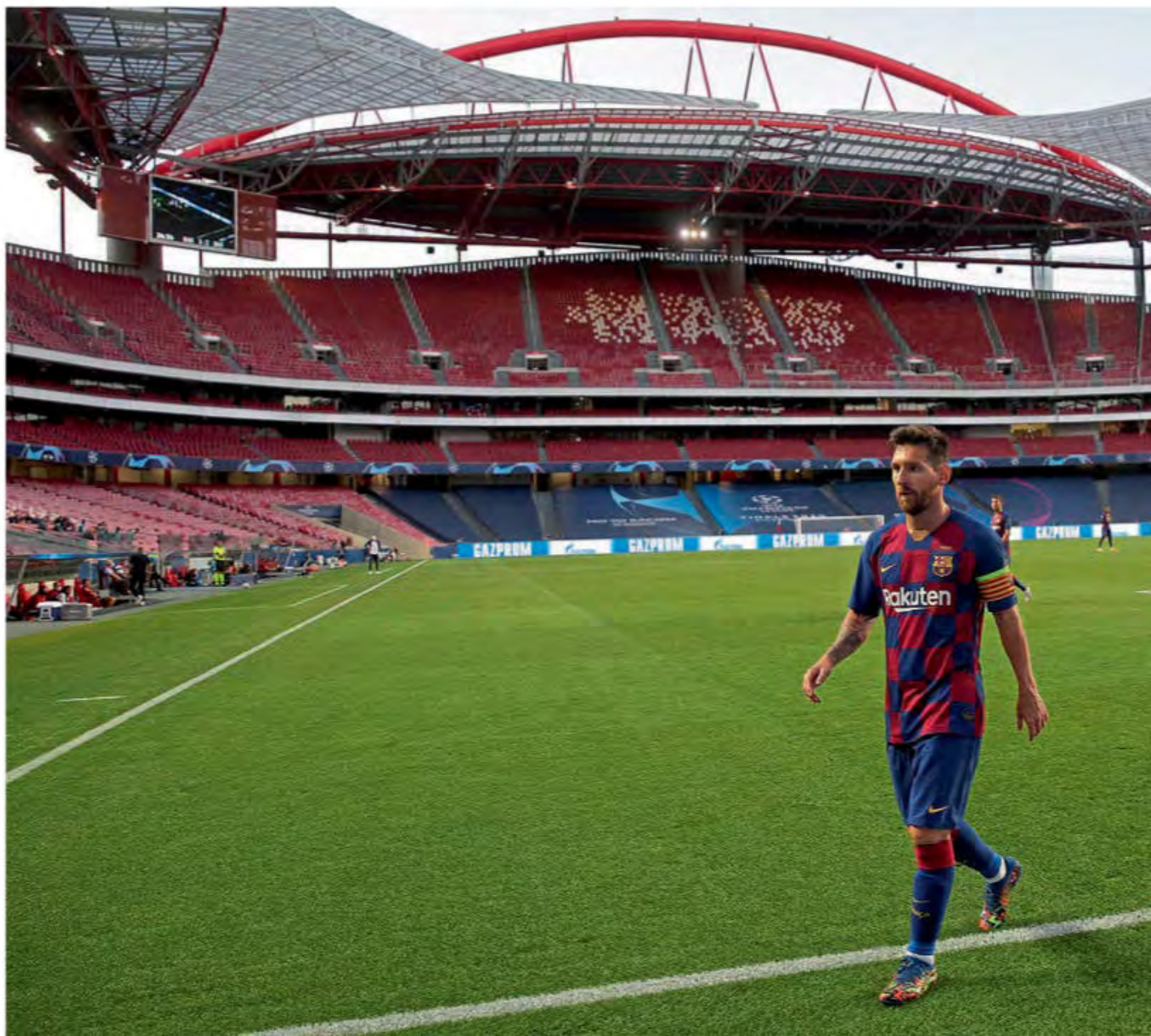
One option for Messi was to walk away unilaterally and request that FIFA issue an International Transfer Certificate pending a resolution of the case, heard either by a FIFA tribunal or civil courts. FIFA would do so, but it was a risky strategy for him: if Messi was able to convince a court that he had successfully triggered the release clause despite missing the June 10 deadline, he would be a free agent. If he lost, then he and the club that signed him could face fines or bans, and the prospect of being forced to pay €700m for what he had done. As one sports lawyer put it: "They'd have to be mad to try that."

Soon, another leak from Messi's camp claimed that the €700m buyout clause did not apply in the final season anyway. In which case, the risk would not be so high. But it still didn't mean he could walk away for free – and there was no way of being sure what level a fee would be set by tribunal. Even if he is in the final year of his career, what price the world's best player?

What the legal posturing did was apply pressure on Barca to let him go, to negotiate a settlement with him or his suitors. He had just one season left on his deal so could definitely walk for free in nine months' time and begin to openly talk to clubs from January 1. The economic benefit of releasing him might also be attractive to Barcelona: facing a severe financial crisis, it would be natural for them to feel the urge to recover money while they still could, and to save almost €100m in wages annually.

Nor did it really make sense to force him to stay against his will. Koeman had said that he only wanted players who wanted to be there. The relationship with the club was in tatters (especially with its president, although he is set to be gone by next summer). And that was the point: the saddest thing wasn't so much that Messi might leave as the fact that he even wanted to.

That it had come to this, that things were so bad that someone who had



Defeat...Barca's 8-2 loss to Bayern Munich looked set to be Messi's final game for the club

made the city his home and the club his own, had reached the point where he preferred to leave. That while the rest began preseason training he was hidden away alone, refusing to go – a decision coherent with his stance that he had effectively left already. Messi, their one, their all, their everything, had become so frustrated by failure, so broken by it all, as to look elsewhere. The trust had been so completely destroyed, bringing them to the brink. He had to go. "I needed it, the club needed it, it was good for everyone," he insisted.

He needed to win, needed to find happiness, he said. And he couldn't at Barcelona, not any more. Aware that time was running out, aware that he had won just one Champions League in nine years, he sought solutions elsewhere. He had no faith that things would change at the Nou Camp. "For a long time now, there has been no project or anything; they're performing a balancing act, plugging holes as they go along," Messi would say later.

The solution lay with his former coach Pep Guardiola, Messi thought. He called Guardiola soon after the 8-2 defeat to Bayern Munich. Manchester City were soon on board. There was a chance, they thought, and they were ready for it. But they also knew it wasn't certain: Messi's position wasn't watertight, but nor was Barcelona's. City had to wait for some resolution, or to be invited to the negotiating table.

More protests... "Messi stay"

Meanwhile, not much moved. Messi was gone, Messi said. No, he's not and no he won't, Barcelona said. The league got involved too, issuing a public statement insisting that Messi's contract remained valid and the €700m buyout clause still applied. They also vowed that they would not hand over the paperwork if anyone tried to sign him without paying €700m in full – even though it was nothing to do with them.

It was stalemate. This was no real solution for anyone. Surely negotiations would come next? There is a Spanish phrase that seemed to sum it up nicely: "Condemned to understand each other."

As it turned out, they weren't.

Messi's father Jorge flew back from Argentina to speak to Barcelona, but no one budged during the meeting. They were stuck still. "This is a case of who blinks first," someone said from inside.

In the end, it was Messi. On the same day that his father released a statement accusing the league of self-interest and a clear mistake in interpreting the clause, reiterating that Messi could walk for free and sarcastically asking what contract they were reading anyway, one last point scored to no avail, it came to an end. Messi backed down; he was staying. Ten days had passed. In the end, it had been mercifully short.

> "I'm staying because the president said the only way to go was to pay the €700m clause, which is impossible"

Ultimately, the risks were too great. Messi had missed the deadline that would have definitively allowed for his departure. Had he moved sooner, he would be gone as he wished. But he said he couldn't while they were still playing. He couldn't prove that he had informed them of his intention to go prior to June 10. He insisted the president had told him he could go, but couldn't prove that legally. His mistake may have been to have trust in a president who is a survivor. If so, it was a huge, naive error he won't make again. It is also worth remembering that on June 10, City faced two seasons out of European competition. Maybe Messi still hadn't quite taken the final step mentally.

By the time he did, it was too late.

Barcelona fans had their happy ending, only there was nothing happy about it. If this was a victory for Bartomeu, the president who had managed to keep the club's best player as he had said he would, it felt like a hollow one. The club's own media channels didn't even reflect the news for hours, still less celebrate it. Instead of reconciliation, there was resentment. Acrimonious splits are one thing; this was an acrimonious reuniting. Nothing had been fixed. Everything had changed, and for the worse, except the club Messi plays at.

In the interview with *Goal* in which Messi announced his decision to stay, there was no pretence, no sugar-coating this, just brutal honesty. He had stayed, he said, not because he changed his mind, not for love, not because he couldn't break the fans' hearts, but because he had no other choice. He was effectively a prisoner.

"I'm staying because the president said the only way to go was to pay the €700m clause, which is impossible. The other way was to go to court. I would never go to court against the club I love," he said. Especially not when you might lose.

"I don't know what will happen now," Messi admitted. Nor did anyone else. One thing they did know was that things would never be the same again. Two days later, he was back in training. That morning he was the first to arrive.

30 eye-catching transfers

Jamie Evans examines this summer's transfer window, picking out the record-breakers, bargain buys and risky moves.

JAMES RODRIGUEZ

1 The good news for Everton fans is that, looking back over James Rodriguez's career, his best campaigns have come as the star player at sides just below the elite: 26 goals in two seasons at Porto, nine goals and 12 assists in a year at Monaco, and, most famously, his Golden Boot-winning performance at the 2014 World Cup for Colombia.

The exception to that rule – 13 goals and 13 assists in his debut La Liga campaign at Real Madrid – came under the management of the Toffees' current boss, Carlo Ancelotti. The £20m move might just be a match made in heaven.

The early signs have been promising: Rodriguez created five chances on his Premier League debut, a 1-0 win at Tottenham, and his ability to dictate attacks alongside the more mobile Richarlison and Dominic Calvert-Lewin is a promising combination.

At the age of 29, he is running out of time to hit the heights that he reached in Brazil during the summer of 2014. But if he can help bring some success back to Goodison Park, he will be a hero for the Everton supporters.

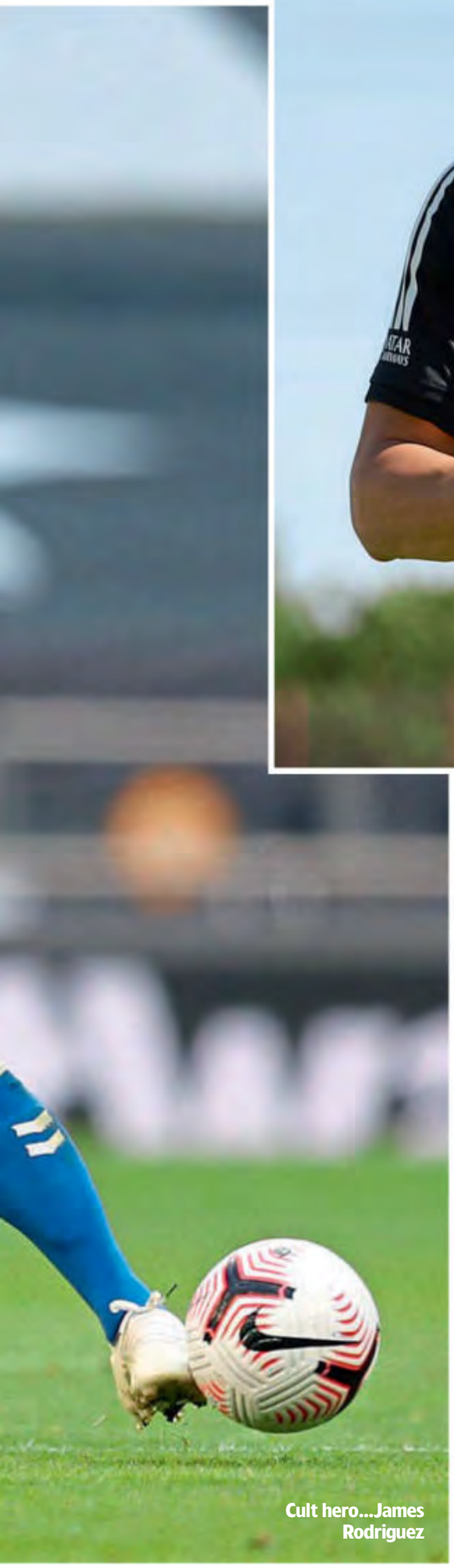
Speed...Leroy Sane

LEROY SANE

2 Watching Alphonso Davies and Kingsley Coman dominate against Paris Saint-Germain in August's Champions League final, it was hard to conclude that Bayern were lacking pace and directness on their left flank.

But that is exactly what they have added in €45m man Sane, who returns to Germany after scoring 25 goals and assisting 28 in 90 Premier League games for Manchester City.

With Joshua Kimmich and Serge Gnabry on the other wing, the Germans can claim to have the most dangerous flanks in European football, serving up last season's 55-goal hero, Robert Lewandowski. However Hansi Flick accommodates Sane in the front line, Bayern are sure to be a devastating attacking force once again.


Cult hero...James Rodriguez

SANDRO TONALI

3 Italy central midfielder Tonali has been destined for one of Serie A's giants for at least two seasons, with comparisons to Andrea Pirlo becoming louder and louder. Given those comparisons, it seemed likely that Pirlo's appointment as Juventus head coach would give the Italian champions a significant advantage in the race for the talented 20-year-old, so it was something of a coup for Milan to beat rivals Juve and Internazionale to the signing.

As well as possessing an exceptional passing range, Tonali has the mobility and defensive nous to truly control the midfield. He will pull the strings in an exciting young Milan side that is packed with potential and led by the evergreen Zlatan Ibrahimovic. After ending last season so strongly, they have high hopes of returning to the Champions League for the first time since 2013-14.

Next Pirlo... Sandro Tonali

VICTOR OSIMHEN

4 Napoli have paid Lille €60m up front for Osimhen, but if all of the additional clauses are met, he will replace Arsenal winger Nicolas Pepe as the most expensive African player of all time at €81m.

It is an astounding sum for a 21-year-old who scored 18 goals in all competitions last season, and 20 the year before on loan at Belgian side Charleroi. Yet with several of Europe's biggest clubs interested in the young Nigeria striker, he is clearly a highly-regarded talent.

Ultimately, Napoli were prepared to meet the asking price after their worst finish for over a decade, and will hope that Osimhen can follow in the footsteps of Dries Mertens, Gonzalo Higuain and Edinson Cavani by spearheading a title challenge.

Record-breaker... Victor Osimhen

Veteran...Thiago Silva

THIAGO SILVA

5 When Thiago Silva announced that he was leaving Paris Saint-Germain, it was clear that the Brazil defender would have several suitors. However, whether Chelsea is quite the right fit for him remains to be seen.

Certainly defence is an area that the Blues needed to improve, having conceded 54 goals in 2019-20 – more than any other side in the Premier League top ten – and the hope is that Silva can use his experience to marshal the back line. It was not so long ago that he was widely considered to be the world's best centre-back, and he will be keen to prove himself in a new league.

But the 35-year-old will face a much sterner test in England than he has been used to in the last eight years as part of PSG's dominant side, and opposition managers will attempt to target him. If he can be isolated, it could be a tough season for Silva.

THE REST

KAI HAVERTZ
(Bayer Leverkusen to Chelsea)
The 21-year-old is technically flawless, athletically impressive and tactically versatile. The question is when, not if, he will be considered among football's elite.

ETHAN AMPADU
(Chelsea to Sheffield United)
Ampadu has 15 Wales caps, yet began this season with just 12 league games to his name – eight of which came at League Two Exeter. The 20-year-old has big potential, but needs regular football.

OLLIE WATKINS
(Brentford to Aston Villa)
Villa's record signing will link up with the manager that brought him to Brentford, Dean Smith. Scorer of 26 Championship goals last season, there is big pressure on Watkins to step up to the Premier League.

ANTONY
(Sao Paulo to Ajax)
This deal was agreed in February, but Antony had to wait until September for his debut – and what a debut it was. The left-footed right-winger struck the winner from 25 yards in a 1-0 win over Sparta Rotterdam.

NACER CHADLI
(Monaco to Istanbul Basaksehir)
Chadli was a rare positive on loan at Anderlecht last season, scoring eight goals in 17 games. The Turkish champs already have plenty of experience, and the Belgium winger will add to that.

JONATHAN DAVID
(Gent to Lille)
By replacing Osimhen with David for less than half the price, Lille have done some tidy business. The Canada striker scored 23 goals for Gent last season.

Returning...Ivan Rakitic

BRAHIM DIAZ
(Real Madrid to Milan)
Since leaving Man. City in January 2019, the diminutive winger has played just 15 league matches for Real Madrid. Has joined Milan on loan to replace Suso.

EBERECHI EZE
(QPR to Crystal Palace)
Eze's Premier League debut saw him join Wilfried Zaha in Palace's attack, and few sides can boast such dribbling ability. The 22-year-old is capable of magic.

WUILKER FARINEZ
(Millonarios to Lens)
At 5ft 9ins, Farinez's game is based on reflexes rather than physical presence. If he adjusts to European football on loan at Lens, he'll be on the move again soon.

EVERTON SOARES
(Gremio to Benfica)
Part of Benfica's €78m spending spree, the 24-year-old winger – who won the the 2019 Copa America Golden Boot – could take Portugal by storm.

Japanese Messi...Takefusa Kubo

MORGAN GIBBS-WHITE
(Wolves to Swansea City)
Sometimes players have to take a step back to move forward. This loan will see Gibbs-White reunite with Steve Cooper, with whom he won the U17 World Cup in 2017, to help unlock his potential.

TAKEFUSA KUBO
(Real Madrid to Villarreal)
Kubo had an encouraging loan at Mallorca in 2019-20; this time he will play in the Europa League with Villarreal. The hope is that he will return ready for the first team – like Martin Odegaard did.

DANI PAREJO & FRANCIS COQUELIN
(Valencia to Villarreal)
Valencia supporters were so outraged by the sale of their midfield duo that they staged a protest at the Mestalla. Picking up the pair for less than €8m more than makes up for the loss of Santi Cazorla.

ADOLFO GAICH
(San Lorenzo to CSKA Moscow)
The highly-sought after 21-year-old is a powerful centre-forward who hit six goals in five games for Argentina U23s, before making his senior debut last year.

GABRIEL MAGALHAES
(Lille to Arsenal)
A soft underbelly has prevented Arsenal from competing for years, yet in Gabriel they may finally have found a solution. The Brazilian has both physical presence and excellent defensive awareness.

WESTON McKENNIE
(Schalke to Juventus)
The first American to play for Juventus, McKennie is on loan for the first year. The early signs are that he will occupy the deep-lying *regista* position that his new coach Andrea Pirlo mastered.

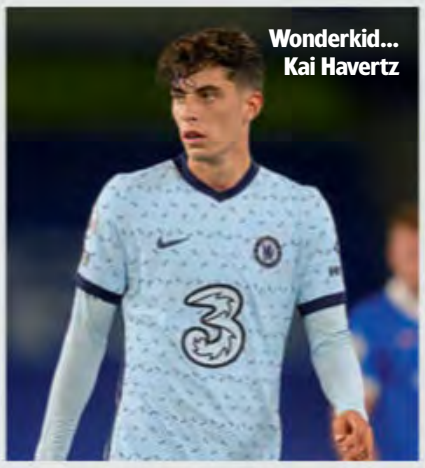
IVAN RAKITIC
(Barcelona to Sevilla)
The Croatian returns to the club where he spent four years, scoring 34 goals in 149 games. Can he help Sevilla graduate from Europa League specialists to Champions League contenders?

RODRIGO
(Valencia to Leeds United)
Leeds have brought Rodrigo back to the Premier League for a club-record £26m, ten years after the Spaniard scored one goal in 21 games for Bolton Wanderers.

DAVID SILVA
(Manchester City to Real Sociedad)
As a World Cup winner with four Premier League medals, it might seem that Silva has nothing left to prove; yet he is still underappreciated in his home country. Helping Real Sociedad improve on last season will help change that.

FABIO SILVA
(Porto to Wolves)
On one hand, the 18-year-old was the star of the Porto side that won the UEFA Youth League in 2019. On the other, he's moved for £35m in spite of scoring just one league goal in 12 appearances. Wolves are banking on his potential.

EVANILSON
(Tombense to Porto)
Porto have replaced one promising young forward with another. Evanilson already has European experience from a loan at Slovakian outfit Samorin in 2017-18, before returning to Brazil to top the U20 league's scoring charts.


Wonderkid... Kai Havertz

MEHDI TAREMI
(Rio Ave to Porto)
Porto also picked up the league's joint-top scorer from last season, who ended the campaign with 11 goals in as many games. Now with the champions, Taremi could be in for another prolific season.

DONNY VAN DE BEEK
(Ajax to Manchester United)
The coronavirus outbreak prevented Van de Beek joining Real Madrid in January, but now he has joined Bruno Fernandes and Paul Pogba in one of the most creative midfield trios in Europe.

VEDAT MURIQI
(Fenerbahce to Lazio)
The tall goal poacher from Kosovo had been the subject of Premier League interest, so it will be interesting to see how he handles the step up from Turkish football, where he scored over 70 goals.

SHON WEISSMAN
(Wolfsberger to Valladolid)
The 24-year-old rattled in 30 goals in 31 games in the Austrian Bundesliga last season – only four players scored more top-flight goals in Europe. Can he translate that form to La Liga?

FCB
FCB

AMERICAN DREAMER

Bayern Munich are nurturing the USA's next big talent. **Ryan Baldi** reports...

When 20-year-old American centre-back Chris Richards made his Bayern Munich debut in the Bundesliga champions' penultimate league game of the 2019-20 campaign, the company he was keeping laid bare the mammoth task ahead of him in the coming seasons.

There was six minutes left of a 3-1 win over Freiburg at the Allianz Arena when coach Hansi Flick threw the United States U20 prodigy into the fray. Lining up alongside Jerome Boateng, Benjamin Pavard and Lucas Hernandez, Richards was the only member of the Bayern back four without a World Cup winner's medal.

Many of the American youngsters thriving in Germany's top flight at present are doing so outside of European football's most intense glare; their development is being eased along at clubs they will view as springboards to bigger things. That's not the case for Richards. Clubs don't get any bigger than Bayern, but the confident Alabama-native is undaunted by the prospect of fighting for a regular place within the continent's most talent-rich line-up.

"I definitely feel like there is some extra pressure on me when it comes to what club I'm playing at," Richards says. "Bayern is one of the biggest clubs in the world and traditionally one of the best as well. People are already kind of counting me out because I'm an American playing at Bayern. They're like, "Oh, it'll never happen."

"I'm not so infatuated with the big names. I want to be able to show people that, even though I am at Bayern, I can play just as well as any other player. That's my biggest motivation."

Richards joined Bayern from FC Dallas in 2018, initially on loan for a year after a successful ten-day trial. He'd never played a senior game for the MLS side, but his performances at youth level, both internationally and with his club, convinced Bayern of his potential. An official partnership between the two clubs gives the German giants first refusal on Dallas' best young players; several have trained with Bayern, but Richards, thus far, is the only one to be signed.

"I believe it was the spring of 2018," Richards says, thinking back to when he first learned of Bayern's interest. "We had this upcoming tournament called the Dallas Cup, which is a pretty big thing in the US. I remember hearing, "Bayern are at the game. We don't want to put much pressure on you but they'll

probably be there watching you." It was kind of scary but I was also really motivated for that game. When I joined Dallas, they hadn't yet signed [the partnership with Bayern]. Once they signed it, I think we were all aware of it. We thought maybe that it was something that wasn't tangible."

Although the prospect of becoming the latest American hopeful aiming to follow Christian Pulisic's route through Germany to international stardom was enticing, such a cross-continental move would be intimidating for most 18-year-olds. But Richards' transition to Europe was eased by the fact he'd already left his family home, moving some 600 miles west to pursue his football dream in Texas when he was just 16.

"I think it for sure helped my decision," he says. "It made it a lot easier because I grew up a lot in those two years after leaving home. It was just a matter of becoming my own person in Germany.

"I would say it probably took a year to fully get into the culture and know the language good enough to speak out in the town and stuff like that. My family have come to visit me a few times and I've had some friends come to visit me. They try to keep me occupied."

And any lingering reservations he had about making the transatlantic leap were allayed when he sought the counsel of fellow young American players already playing in Germany.

"I talked to [then Schalke midfielder] Weston McKennie, because we have the same agent, and I also spoke a little bit to Taylor Booth, who's also at Bayern with me, and Zyen Jones, who used to be at Schalke," Richards explains. "They said if there's a league to start off your career in, the Bundesliga is the place to do it. I'd seen the success of Christian [Pulisic] and Weston. They all assured me that the Bundesliga was the best place, not just for an American, but for any player trying to make his name in the world."

ICC...Richards clashes with Manchester City winger Riyad Mahrez

> "I'd seen the success of Christian [Pulisic] and Weston [McKennie]. They all assured me that the Bundesliga was the best place, not just for an American, but for any player trying to make his name"

Debut...Richards played his first Bundesliga match v Freiburg in June

For a teenager yet to taste first-team football, Richards' introduction at Bayern was something of a baptism of fire. With the German champions participating in the 2018 International Champions Cup – a pre-season tournament staged predominantly in the US – he made his non-competitive debut on home soil, featuring in games against Paris Saint-Germain, Juventus and Manchester City.

Aside from those first few friendlies, though, Richards didn't see first-team action in his loan year in Bavaria, instead starring for the club's U19s. But, earmarked from the outset as a youngster of high potential, he was exposed to training sessions with the senior side, at which point he was struck by the grandeur of the 30-time champions of Germany.

"Just tradition – you see it everywhere around the club," he says. "There are coaches who were some of the best players at the club. It's really eye-opening, training with players like [Robert] Lewandowski and [David] Alaba; [Franck] Ribery and [Arjen] Robben were both there. All these guys who have won the World Cup and been in the FIFA Best XI. They've won eight titles in a row, and you see those titles every day. It's a really traditional club – that was my first impression of Bayern."

Richards impressed sufficiently while on loan with Bayern to secure a five-year contract. In 2019-20, after a promotion to the second team, he was a key player in Bayern II's third-division title triumph, making 30 league appearances and even adding a goal threat to his game, scoring four times. A rich reward for his fine form came in the shape of a first, intoxicating taste of Bundesliga action at the tail end of the campaign. Two years into his European journey, the young American defender can see why so many of his compatriots have flocked to German football.

Celebrating...He scored four goals for Bayern's reserves in 2019-20

"I think it's that the guys are finally willing to step out of their comfort zone and go to a new place," Richards suggests. "Here in Germany, it's a lot more technical than back home in the States. I'm not saying that MLS isn't technical, but the Bundesliga – and especially Bayern – it's a completely different level. These guys are playing week in, week out, against some of the best teams in Europe, whether it's in the Champions League or the Bundesliga. At Bayern, you see their technique, their pace and their fluidity with the ball is a lot better than back home.

"I know a few players who haven't made the jump who could easily do it – it's just a matter of leaving their family or leaving the environment they're stuck in and making the jump. It's not 100 per cent that you're going to make it, but this new generation of Americans, we have a certain hunger, a certain drive that we want to show the world."

Warm-up...Training with the first team ahead of Bayern's Champions League quarter-final

In making his debut in June, Richards became only the second American to play in the Bundesliga for Bayern, after USA legend Landon Donovan's brief, six-game loan spell at the Allianz Arena in 2009. He is under no illusion that his work is done, though. His aim is to follow former MLS standout Alphonso Davies' path to a regular first-team berth, a route he is already mapping out.

"My short-term goal is to get included with the national team for World Cup qualifying. That's one of my big things. I've always loved to wear my nation's crest on my chest and that's always a really proud moment for me, so that's one of my goals.

"Another goal I have is to get more reps with the first team, so that when it is my time to step into that role, I'll be ready to hit it head on."

He might not have the medals or experience of the defenders currently ahead of him in the Bayern pecking order, but, at 20 years old, Richards has time, talent and unshakable self-confidence on his side. The latest of the Bundesliga's American success stories could be the most compelling yet.

TOMORROW'S STARS TODAY

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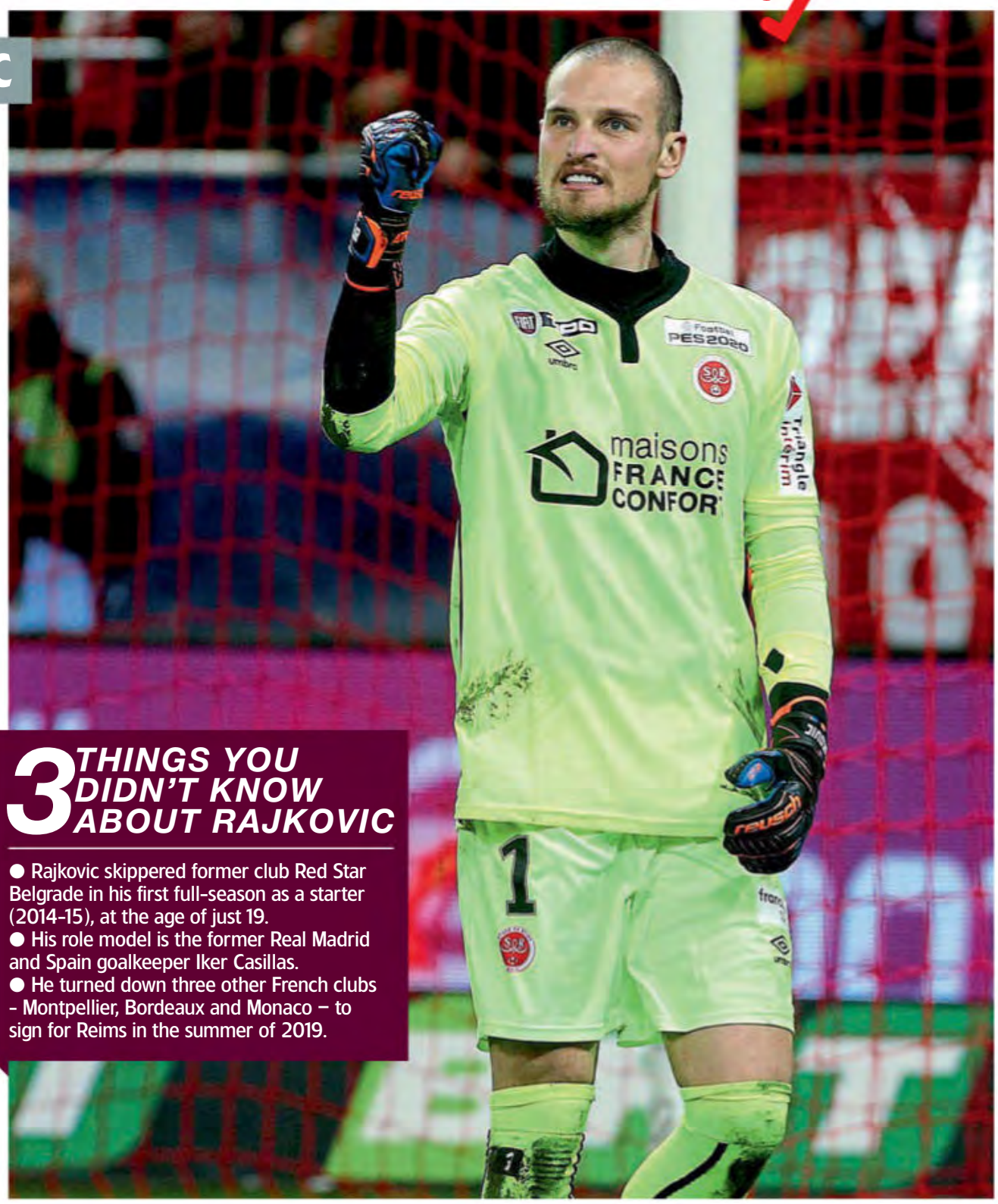
Words Nick Bidwell

Predrag RAJKOVIC



Reims

In a sentence
Much in-vogue Serbian keeper, rated the best custodian in Ligue 1 last season and a brilliant penalty-saving specialist.

What they say
"He has the big size and I'm not over-exaggerating when I say he reminds me of Bayern and Germany's Manuel Neuer. He has the same attitude and posture. He is comfortable with both feet and exudes assurance and personality."

Sebastien Hamel, Reims goalkeeper coach.

"He's a young keeper with huge potential. As a person, he is very open and wants to listen. He already has tremendous mental toughness. He really imposes himself in his penalty area."

David Guion, Reims head coach.

3 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT RAJKOVIC

- Rajkovic skippered former club Red Star Belgrade in his first full-season as a starter (2014-15), at the age of just 19.
- His role model is the former Real Madrid and Spain goalkeeper Iker Casillas.
- He turned down three other French clubs - Montpellier, Bordeaux and Monaco – to sign for Reims in the summer of 2019.

The story so far
Grew up in Negotin, eastern Serbia, with a former goalkeeper for a father, coach and mentor. Rajkovic senior, first name Sasa, used to play in goal in the third and fourth tiers of the domestic pyramid for Hajduk Veljko, where Predrag began his youth career.

After seven years he moved to FK Jagodina, making his professional debut against Partizan Belgrade at the age of 17. That same year, 2013, he helped Serbia triumph at the European U19 Championship, saving two penalties in a shoot-out victory over Portugal in the semi-finals. Two years later, he came up trumps at the U20 World Cup too, skippering the side to victory and winning the Golden Glove as the tournament's best goalkeeper.

After spending two seasons with Red Star Belgrade, he surprisingly moved to Israeli side Maccabi Tel Aviv in 2015, where he gained Champions League experience, played 196 games over four seasons, and won a domestic league and cup double in 2018-19.

French side Reims paid €5m for him a year ago, and he quickly delivered in Champagne land, keeping 12 Ligue 1 clean sheets, saving four out of five penalties and marshalling the meanest back line in the French top flight (only conceding 18 goals in 27 outings).

Since making his senior international debut against Colombia in August 2013, he has competed with Eibar's Marko Dmitrovic for Serbia's No.1 jersey.

> "I'm not over-exaggerating when I say he reminds me of Bayern and Germany's Manuel Neuer"
>
> Sebastien Hamel, Reims goalkeeper coach

The next step
Despite rumours of a big-money move this summer (to PSG, Milan or Sevilla), he seems happy to remain at the Stade Auguste-Delaune for one more season. Reims president Jean-Pierre Caillot is thought to want at least €20m for Rajkovic, who still has three years left on his current deal.

Strengths
His commanding presence, sensational reflexes and ability to stand tall and wide in one-on-one situations. Good sweeper-keeper instincts and very positive when coming for crosses.

Weaknesses
Occasionally lets his latent eccentricity bubble to the surface, and must be more accurate in his long-kicking game.

Diogo COSTA

Porto
Outstanding 20-year-old homegrown talent, who has stepped up in Porto's pecking order after the retirement of Iker Casillas. Costa has made excellent progress in recent years, twice a European champion – once with Portugal U17s and again with the U19s – and a UEFA Youth League winner with Porto in 2018-19.

Bartlomiej DRAGOWSKI

Fiorentina
While on loan at Empoli in 2018-19, the young Pole blocked or diverted no fewer than 17 goal-bound efforts in a Serie A fixture against Atalanta. No other Italian top-flight keeper has ever registered such numbers in the last 15 years. Joined Fiorentina from Polish club Jagiellonia back in July 2016.

Ivo GRBIC

Atletico Madrid
The 24-year-old goalkeeper recently left Lokomotiva Zagreb for Spanish heavyweights Atletico, and has more than a passing resemblance to their former No.1 Thibaut Courtois. Tall, agile and a reflex save-master, he began his career at Hajduk Split, and recently earned his first call-up to the senior Croatia squad.

Lennart GRILL

Bayer Leverkusen
Finn Lukas Hradecky, Leverkusen's first-choice keeper, will have to be on his guard now that the Germany U21 custodian has arrived on the BayArena scene, recruited from third division Kaiserslautern for an eminently affordable €2m. The 21-year-old played over 50 games in two years after serving his apprenticeship at Mainz.

Gautier LARSONNEUR

Brest
Being one of the smallest goalkeepers in Ligue 1 has proved no barrier to his development. Very calm, good on the ball and exemplary in his aerial timing. A France U21 international, Larsonneur joined Brest aged nine and has been their No.1 since 2017-18, missing just three league games in the last three seasons.

Andriy LUNIN

Real Madrid
After loans with Leganes, Valladolid and Oviedo, the precocious Ukrainian was recently recalled to Bernabeu HQ, where he will serve this term as Thibaut Courtois' understudy. A world champion with his country's Under-20s in 2019, he almost single-handedly kept Oviedo away from second division relegation last season.

Luis MAXIMIANO

Sporting
Still only 21 years old, the graduate of Sporting's ever-productive youth system enjoyed an outstanding breakthrough campaign in 2019-20, successfully supplanting Renan Ribeiro at the top of the goalkeeping pecking order. The likes of Barcelona, Milan, Internazionale and Ajax have him in their sights, subject to a €45m release clause.

Unai SIMON

Athletic Bilbao
The Basque Country has a rich tradition of churning out top-ranking goalkeepers and the 23-year-old very much comes into that category. Just beginning his third season in the Bilbao first team, he was arguably the club's best performer last term and is in line to become the 11th Athletic keeper to win full honours for Spain.

Glenn Moore

Lyon reign supreme

French champions unstoppable in Europe once again

The best teams are traditionally built around a spine: centre-back, centre-midfield, centre-forward. By the time Lyon arrived in the Champions League final in San Sebastian, they had lost starters in all three positions to injury, and their back-up striker to suspension. Rather than collapse without their first-choice spine, they simply tore Wolfsburg apart down the right flank instead, lifting their fifth successive European crown and seventh in total. No Ada Hegerberg, no Amandine Henry, no Griedge Mbock Bathy, no Nikita Parris – no problem.

This was supposed to be the year that Lyon were vulnerable. It was not just the injuries; better-resourced clubs such as Barcelona, Paris Saint-Germain, Chelsea and Manchester City are all stepping up their investment in their women's teams. Lyon are a wealthy club, but not in the first rank of European superpowers.

When it comes to the female game however, they remain supreme. In this mini-tournament they were stretched by both Bayern Munich in the quarter-final and PSG in the semi-final. But on both occasions their quality, experience and resilience took them through. Wolfsburg, now beaten by Lyon in five successive Champions League seasons, three times in finals, were actually the least troubling of their opponents in the Basque Country.

For the German champions, time may be running out. The transfer of Sara Bjork Gunnarsdottir to Lyon mid-campaign seems emblematic of their fate. The Iceland midfielder deputised superbly for Henry in the final and afterwards had a pick of medals – having played for both teams in the competition she was uniquely eligible for both winners and runners-up baubles.

Even more significant in the long-term is the departure of Pernille Harder to Chelsea, for a fee reported to be as high as £300,000 – a world-record. Harder will be difficult to replace, even if that fee is put to use. Though this was their first defeat since losing to Lyon in the last eight in March 2019, the Lady Wolves are in danger of being drawn into the pack behind Lyon, instead of leading the chase.

The last eight began well enough for Wolfsburg with a 9-1 demolition of Glasgow City, Harder scoring four. It was an unsurprising result considering the part-timers had played once since October, and that in February. On the same night, Barcelona eventually broke down a determined defensive display by an Atletico Madrid side hampered by COVID quarantine and a high player turnover since March. Midfielder Kheira Hamraoui, twice a winner with Lyon, broke Hedvig Lindahl's resistance ten minutes from time.

> This was supposed to be the year that Lyon were vulnerable…when it comes to the female game, however, they remain supreme

The next evening Parris bravely headed Lyon into the lead against Bayern, Amel Majri adding a second from a free-kick. That was enough to withstand a Bayern rally following Carolin Simon's reply. It set up an all-French semi as PSG defeated a rusty-looking Arsenal by the same scoreline. Marie-Antoinette Katoto and Signe Bruun took advantage of some sleepy defending either side of Beth Mead's neat strike.

Mead was actually fractionally offside, but VAR was only used for the final, which seemed odd given that it was in both stadia, and was used for every game in the matching mini tournaments for the men's Champions League and Europa League.

The first semi-final, in San Sebastian's Anoeta, was a missed opportunity for Barcelona, who had 16 attempts on goal but forced only one save. Wolfsburg were more accurate even if Fridolina Rolfo's winner in the 58th minute was somewhat scrambled.

"We did everything except score," said Caroline Graham Hansen, while team-mate Alexia Putellas added: "I think we're on the right track but we are not there yet. The ceiling just gets higher but comparatively we are progressing."

A night later in Bilbao there was another tight match between the twin titans of the French game, and it was another one settled in Lyon's favour. The game turned in the 65th minute when Grace Geyoro was shown a second yellow for a foul on Lucy Bronze. From Majri's free-kick, Wendie Renard scored from a typical towering header. PSG were given hope with 15 minutes left when Parris also saw red for two

Winners...Lyon lift the trophy for the seventh time

Seven...Eugenie Le Sommer, Wendie Renard and Sarah Bouhaddi have played in every final victory

cautions, but Lyon held firm.

Eugenie Le Sommer replaced Parris in the final, and scored the opening goal, set up by Delphine Cascarino who combined with Bronze on the right to devastating effect. Cascarino also created the second, finished by Saki Kumagai. It looked all over at half-time but Wolfsburg rallied, Alexandra Popp heading in just before the hour. Their hope persisted until the 88th minute before being cruelly dashed as Le Sommer's wide shot was smartly deflected in by Gunnarsdottir, so recently their team-mate.

Lyon last lost in May 2018, but if the constant diet of success has jaded appetites they hid it well. Le Sommer, Renard and Sarah Bouhaddi have played in all seven Champions League successes but they celebrated as if it was the first. "My players have a thirst for trophies, I've never seen that so apparent as now," said Jean-Luc Vasseur, the Lyon coach.

They've now lost the departed Bronze and Alex Greenwood to Manchester City, but Bouhaddi and Dzsenifer Marozsan have signed new deals after flirting with NWSL, Hegerberg took advantage of the COVID break to have surgery on a niggling injury, and talented young Australian Ellie Carpenter has joined. Lyon may have missed out on the likes of Rose Lavelle, Sam Kerr and Harder, but they remain the team to beat.

Round-up

Winners...Chelsea lift the Community Shield

CHELSEA WIN AT WEMBLEY

A closed-doors Wembley hosted a unique Community Shield double-bill, staging the men's and the women's event on the same day for the first time. With the 2020 FA Cup still to be decided, WSL champions Chelsea were paired with 2019 FA Cup winners Manchester City, whom they beat 2-0 with goals from Millie Bright and Erin Cuthbert.

WSL bound...Christen Press and Rachel Daly

HANSEN TO QUIT NWSL

Utah Royals owner Dell Loy Hansen is in the process of selling the club. Hansen had been the toast of NWSL after providing the facilities for the Challenge Cup but critical comments about an MLS player walk-out in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, and accusations he used racist language, led to pressure on him to quit.

RAPINOE SKIPS FALL SERIES

Megan Rapinoe sat out the NWSL Fall Series, just as she had the Challenge Cup. The event, also designed to provide some fixtures in this COVID-restricted season, was scheduled as an 18-match seven-week campaign with regionally-based three-team "pods".

US EXODUS CONTINUES

More of USA's World Cup winners crossed the Atlantic in response to the truncated NWSL season, with Alex Morgan signing a short-term deal with Tottenham and Christen Press and Tobin Heath joining Manchester United. There were also a series of loan moves including Rachel Daly (Houston-West Ham), Rachel Corsie (Utah-Birmingham), Claire Emslie (Orlando-Everton), Emily van Egmond (Orlando-West Ham) and Alanna Kennedy and Shelina Zadorsky (Orlando-Tottenham).

Absent...Megan Rapinoe

EQUALITY, OF SORTS, IN BRAZIL

The Brazilian federation announced it will now pay the same payments and proportions of World Cup prize money to the men and women's teams. An equal per diem rate is noteworthy, although awarding equal proportions is more symbolic, since prize money at the men's tournament far outstrips the women's; the last two winning teams took home $38m and $4m respectively.

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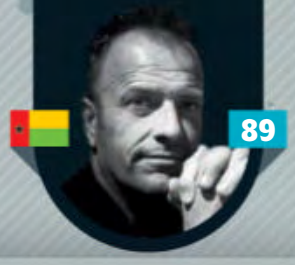

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Play-offs: take two

Nick Bidwell lists the top reasons to watch the rearranged Euro 2020 play-offs

Bulgaria v Hungary

1 Sizzling Szoboszlai
RB Salzburg attacking midfielder Dominik Szoboszlai is, to put it simply, the most accomplished young player to come out of Hungary in many a long year. This all-or-nothing clash is an opportunity to grab the spotlight for the elegant playmaker, who only turns 20 at the end of October. Hungary coach Marco Rossi confidently predicts that the teenager will be a world-class performer in two or three years.

2 Bulgaria's fab full-backs
In the line-up put together by coach Georgi Dermendzhiev, Bulgaria look the strongest in the full-back department. On the left, Ludogorets' Anton Nedyalkov combines grit, resourcefulness and experience while on the opposite flank, newly-naturalised Brazilian Cicinho – also a key figure for domestic champions Ludogorets – offers all the flamboyant attacking qualities you would expect from someone of his South American background.

3 Hungary's Bielsa
The Italian Marco Rossi, Hungary's boss for the past two years, is a proud adherent of the Marcelo Bielsa coaching philosophy, having played under him at Mexican side Club America. He places a premium on quick passing, high, intense pressing and dominating possession, and while it does not always work out with Hungary's limited squad, the Magyars are well-drilled and courageous.

One to watch... Dominik Szoboszlai

Out of form... Bulgaria were beaten by Wales in September

4 Bulgarian exports
Foreign-based players have a vital role to play in Dermendzhiev's side. Much is expected of two attack-minded 23-year-olds: midfielder Bozhidar Kraev, currently in Denmark with Midtjylland, and Cagliari forward Kiril Despodov, who was excellent on loan at Sturm Graz last season. Vice-captain Georgi Kostadinov plays for Arsenal Tula in Russia, while centre-back Vasil Bozhikov, skipper of Slovakians Slovan Bratislava, will also feature prominently.

5 The Leipzig core
It's Hungary's good fortune that they can count on not one but two players from leading Bundesliga outfit RB Leipzig to keep clean sheets. Keeper Peter Gulacsi, all total composure and efficiency, is one of the most secure No.1s in the Bundesliga, while centre-back Willi Orban has all the attributes of a defensive fulcrum: physically powerful, two-footed, a good reader of the game and comfortable on the ball, as well as a considerable threat at set-pieces.

Iceland v Romania

1 Romania's new generation
Semi-finalists at last year's European U21 Championship, Romania have a fine crop of young talent coming through. The list includes Rangers midfielder Ianis Hagi, Reading striker George Puscas, wingers Dennis Man and Florinel Coman, midfield enforcer Alexandru Cicaldau and centre-back Ionut Nedelcearu. Outstanding young keeper Andrei Ionut Radu has just joined Parma on loan from Internazionale, after an impressive year at Genoa.

2 Iceland's golden oldies
In contrast, Iceland's spine is packed with thirty-somethings who were expected to throw in the towel some time ago. But remarkably, the likes of keeper Hannes Halldorsson (36), defenders Kari Arnason (37) and Ari Skulason (33), and midfielder Emil Hallfredsson (36) are still going strong. Coach Erik Hamren initially wondered if the group still had the competitive fire burning in them, but they remain determined to reach their third tournament in a row.

3 Radoi's tough choices
Parachuted in late last year after Cosmin Contra was sacked, Romania coach Mirel Radoi's biggest dilemma is blending youth with experience. Local critics are already accusing him of having too much faith in old hands like Dragos Grigore and Alin Tosca. A particularly thorny dilemma for Radoi is his choice of goalie, with the highly-experienced Ciprian Tatarusanu – currently a back-up at Milan – competing with the highly-rated Radu and Silviu Lung Jr. of Turkish side Kayserispor.

Golden generation... Romania beat England to reach last year's Euro U21s semi-finals

Rising star...Iceland's Albert Gudmundsson

4 Iceland's new hope
After spending much of last season on the sidelines with a complicated ankle injury, 23-year-old AZ winger Albert Gudmundsson has been showing no signs of rustiness in the early part of the new campaign. Indeed, in a Champions League qualifying victory over Viktoria Plzen, he was the player who turned the tide, coming off the bench to score twice in extra-time. A full international since the age of 19, he already has a hat-trick for his country, versus Indonesia in January 2018.

5 Mitrita: heads or tails?
Maverick attacking-third ace Alexandru Mitrita should, in a perfect world, be Romania's trump card. The 25-year-old New York City FC winger or number ten fizzes with ball skills, imagination and match-winning class. But he can also be something of a liability, unwilling to track back and too selfish in possession. His coach in New York, the former Celtic manager Ronny Deila, finds him exasperating, but he could be a match-winner.

Bosnia-Herzegovina v Northern Ireland

1 Bosnia's big-hitters
In front man Edin Dzeko, midfield maestro Miralem Pjanic and dynamic left-back Sead Kolasinac, the Bosnians boast a triumvirate of trusty eminence with top-drawer experience. With 59 goals in 109 caps, skipper Dzeko has an international strike-rate to die for, while Pjanic – who swapped Juventus for Barcelona in the off-season – could dominate the centre of the park after recovering from coronavirus in August.

2 Baraclough watch
Northern Ireland's coach got off to a disappointing start to his new role, drawing 1-1 in Romania before a 5-1 thumping at home to Norway. He has a huge challenge in succeeding Michael O'Neill, who was supposed to take charge of these fixtures before the virus struck and he turned his full attention to Stoke City. In 2016, O'Neill took Northern Ireland to their first tournament in 30 years, and Baraclough must find the same magic touch.

3 Northern Ireland's next generation
At the helm of Northern Ireland's U21s for three years, Baraclough is in a perfect position to make the continuity factor work for him. Youngsters such as Jamal Lewis, Bailey Peacock-Farrell, Daniel Ballard, Jordan Thompson, Gavin Whyte and Shayne Lavery all played under him and have successfully graduated to the senior set-up, helping to fill the void left by the retired heroes of 2016 like Chris Brunt, Gareth MacAuley and Aaron Hughes.

Talisman...Bosnia striker Edin Dzeko

At the helm...New Northern Ireland boss Ian Baracalough

4 The Sykes affair fall-out
One youngster who won't be graduating from the U21s however, is Mark Sykes. The Oxford United midfielder represented Northern Ireland at various youth levels, yet recently announced that he would choose the Republic at senior level, following the likes of James McClean and Shane Duffy. The ensuing fall-out has sparked heated debate on both sides of the border, but the question is: will it have any bearing on the mood in the NI camp?

5 Bosnia's secret weapons
In addition to Bosnia's established stars, the Balkans have several unknown quantities to watch out for. Right-winger Edin Visca is known as the "Atomic Ant" in Bosnia, and has been so good for Istanbul Basaksehir that the Turkish champions are clamouring for a statue of him at their home stadium. Word has it that the young Swedish-born centre-backs Anel Ahmedhodzic and Dennis Hadzikadunic will also earn their first senior caps.

Slovakia v Republic of Ireland

New era...Republic of Ireland boss Stephen Kenny addresses his players

1 A brave new Irish world?
New Republic of Ireland manager Stephen Kelly has sparked a national wave of optimism with talk of a more progressive style of play, ditching the more direct style of his predecessors. The former Dundalk boss impressed in two years in charge of the Under-21s, winning seven out of 12 matches with more positive football, but old habits die hard – his first game with the seniors was a 1-1 draw with Bulgaria, thanks to 90th-minute equaliser from centre-back Shane Duffy.

2 Skriniar v McGoldrick
One of the tie's key match-ups will be between Slovakia's Milan Skriniar – the Internazionale 25-year-old rated as one of the best defenders in Europe – and Ireland striker David McGoldrick. The Sheffield United forward, recently voted FAI Player of the Year, may not be a prolific goalscorer, but his excellent link-up play, industry and mobility makes him vital for club and country. When he drops deep, Skriniar faces a dilemma – does he stick or follow?

3 Hamsik's final curtain?
Should defeat ensue, this play-off might well be the last chance to savour legendary Slovakia midfielder Marek Hamsik on the big stage. His drive, creative swagger and goals are the team's lifeblood and, at the age off 33, he must be approaching the end of his international career. Now starring for Dalian Professional in China after a glorious decade with Napoli, he will see Euro 2020 as the ideal terminus of a stellar career.

Slovakia's Marek Hamsik...Bowing out?

4 The 50-50 call
These two sides could hardly be more evenly matched. They are adjacent in the current FIFA rankings, with Slovakia in 36th and the Republic 37th, while their head-to-head record is almost symmetrical, with four of their five encounters ending in draws. The form book is no more revealing: in their last five games, both teams have each picked up two draws, two defeats, and one win. Extra time and penalties seem highly likely.

5 A tale of three keepers
As a result of Newcastle No.1 Martin Dubravka breaking an ankle in preseason, Slovakia may be forced to call up young Fulham keeper Marek Rodak, who was uncapped at senior level prior to his debut against Israel in September. Stephen Kelly's side will aim to expose this international rawness, yet their own No.1, Darren Randolph, has an entirely different problem: although a regular for his country, he is only a back-up for his club West Ham behind Poland goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski.

Norway v Serbia

Dynamic duo... Haaland and Sorloth celebrate Norway's fifth goal in Belfast

1 Norwegian thunder and lightning

Serbia's centre-backs will have their hands full with Norway's tandem of devastating centre-forwards: Erling Haaland and Alexander Sorloth. Last season, the pair netted 77 club goals, Haaland registering 44 for Salzburg and Dortmund, while Sorloth managed 33 in Turkey for Trabzonspor. Starting together for the first time last month, they scored two each in a 5-1 demolition of Northern Ireland. Serbia, you have been warned.

2 The Serb creators

While Norway's front two is packed with strength and power, Serbia coach Ljubisa Tumbakovic has at his disposal some technically exceptional footballers. Ajax's outstanding Dusan Tadic, Lazio superstar Sergej Milinkovic-Savic, Eintracht Frankfurt dribbler Filip Kostic and winger Adem Ljajic. The creative talent in the country can rival all but the very best teams in Europe.

3 Norway's keeping conundrum

First-choice Norway keeper Rune Jarstein, has spent the last five seasons as a starter with Hertha Berlin, but now finds himself in the shadows at the Olympiastadion, with the newly-arrived former Freiburg custodian Alexander Schwolow. Yet, with Aston Villa's Orjan Nyland, who made some high-profile errors at the end of last season also likely to be short of match practice, coach Lars Lagerback has little choice but to stick with Jarstein.

Record-chasing...Serbia's Aleksandar Mitrovic

4 Different strokes

The contrast in playing styles in this tie should make for fascinating viewing. Norway's back-to-basics 4-4-2, with the emphasis on athleticism, direct duels, long balls and set-pieces. Serbia relying more on fluidity and finesse, looking to make hay with lots of positional rotation and frequent switching of play. The Norwegians must shut down the Serb passing lanes and prevent them passing the ball out from the back.

5 Can Mitrovic keep up his scoring spree?

Fulham spearhead Aleksandar Mitrovic proved an irresistible force in qualifying Group B, scoring ten goals in nine games. He is now within striking distance of becoming Serbia's most prolific marksman ever. The current record is 38, held by Stjepan Bobek, with Mitrovic just three behind on 35. A great natural finisher, his temperament and attitude can occasionally let him down.

Scotland v Israel

1 Raiding Robbo
Israel right-back Eli Dasa should be the busiest man at Hampden Park in this game. The Scottish 3-4-3 system is lopsided, with marauding Liverpool hero Andy Robertson at left wing-back supported by Arsenal's Kieran Tierney on the left of a back three, with Celtic winger Ryan Christie attacking from the same side. As Scotland's one and only world-class player, Robertson must deliver if the dream of a first major tournament in 22 years is to stay alive.

2 The enemy within
Several members of the Israel camp will be on familiar ground in Glasgow. Three of their current squad – the Celtic pair Nir Bitton and Hatem Elhamed, plus Hibernian goalkeeper Ofir Marciano – currently ply their trade in the Scottish Premiership, and the insider knowledge they have accrued could be worth its weight in gold. Both sides know each other well: this will be Israel's second visit to Scotland this Autumn, having drawn 1-1 in September.

3 No damp squibs here
Scotland saw a glimpse of Israel's attacking talent in their recent meeting. The front two of Eran Zahavi – record scorer for Chinese side Guangzhou R&F – and Hoffenheim's Munes Dabbur combined superbly to manufacture an equaliser in Glasgow, and there is more talent to back them up. Bullish centre-forward Shon Weissman scored 37 goals for Austrian side Wolfsberger last season, while Shakhtar's tricky winger Manor Solomon is a rising talent.

Match-up... Andy Robertson and Eli Dasa

Midfield maestro...John McGinn

4 Faults line
Israel's bigger concerns are off the pitch. Caretaker boss Willi Ruttensteiner – a technical director who was drafted in when previous coach Andreas Herzog departed – has only been in the post since July, and had not patrolled a technical area since two matches in charge of Austria in 2011. He says his priority is to tighten up the back-line and play higher up the pitch, but putting those plans into action will not be easy.

5 Crossing the border
The increasing number of Premier League pros in his squad can only be a positive sign for Scotland manager Steve Clarke. His last squad featured eight players from England's top flight, while Newcastle United new boy Ryan Fraser should be fit enough to return to contention. The progress of Aston Villa's John McGinn, recruited from Hibernian in 2018, is evidence that there is talent to be found in the Scottish Premiership.

Georgia v Belarus

1 The bigger picture
At a time of considerable political and social unrest in Belarus, the national team could be forgiven for lacking 100 per cent focus on the sporting battle ahead. The country is in turmoil right now, battered by accusations of rigged presidential elections and mass protests. Nevertheless, football in Belarus has withstood stern tests all year, as the only championship in Europe to carry on playing throughout the coronavirus outbreak.

2 Belarus' goal drought
Georgia can take great heart from the fact that Belarus only managed four goals in eight Euro 2020 qualifiers. Coach Mikhail Markhel has tried all manner of different formulae up front but to no avail. A possible solution might have been 21-year-old Ilya Shkurin, the CSKA Moscow striker who was the top scorer in Belarus in 2019 for Energetik-BGU Minsk, but he is refusing to play for the national team while Alexander Lukashenko remains president.

3 Super Stasevich
Belarus are by no means a one-man team, but they do rely on vastly-experienced right-sided midfielder Ihar Stasevich. The 34-year-old skipper has been voted Belarus Player of the Year in the last two seasons, and he makes the national team tick. Apart from a stint in Russia with Volga Nizhny Novgorod, he has spent the bulk of his career with hometown club BATE Borisov, helping them win nine domestic league titles.

Talisman...Belarus' Ihar Stasevich celebrates scoring against Northern Ireland last year

Experience...Georgia coach Vladimir Weiss

4 Time to be brave
Georgia boss Vladimir Weiss has an impressive CV as an international coach, having taken his native Slovakia to the 2010 World Cup finals – their first major tournament – where they sensationally defeated Italy en route to the last 16. Weiss has a tendency to be a little conservative in his matchday planning and game management, but this play-off semi-final will be no place for faint hearts.

5 A Belgian boost for Georgia
The Georgians will be banking on their Belgium-based stars, the Gent duo of striker Giorgi Kvilitaia (currently on loan at Anorthosis Famagusta in Cyprus) and attacking midfielder Giorgi Chakvetadze. Good enough to have the likes of Bayern Munich, Barcelona and Roma watching him closely, the 21-year-old Chakvetadze has a wand for a right foot combined with bags of vision and instinctive finery. He has one problem – a tendency for knee injuries.

North Macedonia v Kosovo

1 The Kosovo fairy tale
Just four years after becoming members of UEFA and FIFA, Kosovo stand on the threshold of a defining moment in their history, a mere two games from their first international tournament. Given their war-torn past and meagre resources, it would be an extraordinary achievement. Swiss coach Bernard Challandes has been recognised for the progress, recently revealing he turned down several lucrative job offers to remain in charge.

2 The Pandev factor
Every side needs a charismatic talisman and North Macedonia have one such emblematic figure in veteran Genoa forward Goran Pandev, who at the age of 37 is as committed to the North Macedonia cause as ever. A Champions League winner with Jose Mourinho's Internazionale in 2009-10, he had intended to hang ups his boots this summer, but with Euro 2020 postponed because of the pandemic, has now opted for another season of action.

3 Goals, goals, goals
These are two sides with attacking invention and punch. North Macedonia boast the attacking-third talents of Pandev, Enis Bardhi (Levante), Elif Elmas (Napoli) and Ezgjan Alioski (Leeds United). Kosovo are similarly well-endowed, with the much-coveted Milot Rashica supported by Valon Berisha and Arber Zeneli (both with Reims) and Dijon's Bersant Celina. In contrast, neither side's defence is rock-solid, so goals should ensue.

Rapid rise...Kosovo surprised England in a 5-3 defeat last year

Veteran...North Macedonia's Goran Pandev

4 North Macedonia's big-match temperament
In this part of the Balkans, they have a tradition for raising their game on the grand stage. They have twice drawn in England in competitive fixtures (2002 and 2006), drew with Netherlands home and away in World Cup 2006 qualifiers and have recorded impressive victories over neighbours Croatia and Serbia (in 2007 and 2012 respectively). They will need every ounce of that big-match temperament in order to reach their first major tournament.

5 Late to the party
Rumours are circulating that Challandes and company are about to strengthen their ranks with the addition of two Swiss-born players of Kosovan lineage. The pair are both fine prospects: Lausanne striker Andi Zeqiri spent a year in Juventus' academy and scored nine goals in as many games for Switzerland's U21s, while Sion playmaker Bastien Toma has also played for Swiss youth teams.

CONMEBOL World Cup Qualifiers

TIM VICKERY

At risk

South America's qualifying process may have to be shortened or moved

One of the most important years in South American football is 1996, which marked the start of the marathon format of the continent's World Cup qualifiers, with all ten nations playing each other home and away. It provided the type of calendar European national teams take for granted – regular competitive matches, guaranteed income, and it brought about a dramatic improvement in the traditionally weaker sides. South America can now boast the most competitive qualifiers around. No one is making up the numbers. All ten teams go into the competition with dreams of going all the way.

But the format could be at risk this time. The coronavirus has already taken away the March and September matches. And while FIFA have ratified the October dates, there must be big doubts about both them and November's fixtures. The virus has not been brought under control, and there are obvious problems in bringing the stars across from Europe.

It could be a squeeze to fit in the full 18-round schedule. According to Chile's sports minister, talks have been held about staging the games in Europe. More likely would be a return to the previous format, where the teams are divided into groups. This would reduce the number of games – and the income, hence the resistance, but make it easier to complete the process in time for Qatar. But whenever they start and whatever the format, South America's World Cup qualifiers are sure to be fascinating.

According to Chile's sports minister, talks have been held about staging the games in Europe

Colombia...Coach Carlos Queiroz with Everton new boy James Rodriguez

THE BIG GUNS

Both Brazil and Argentina have flirted with disaster in recent times. Brazil nearly failed to make it to 2002 and Argentina had to struggle mightily to be present in 2010 and 2018. In the turmoil of a tough campaign, coaches are sacked and there are massive changes in personnel.

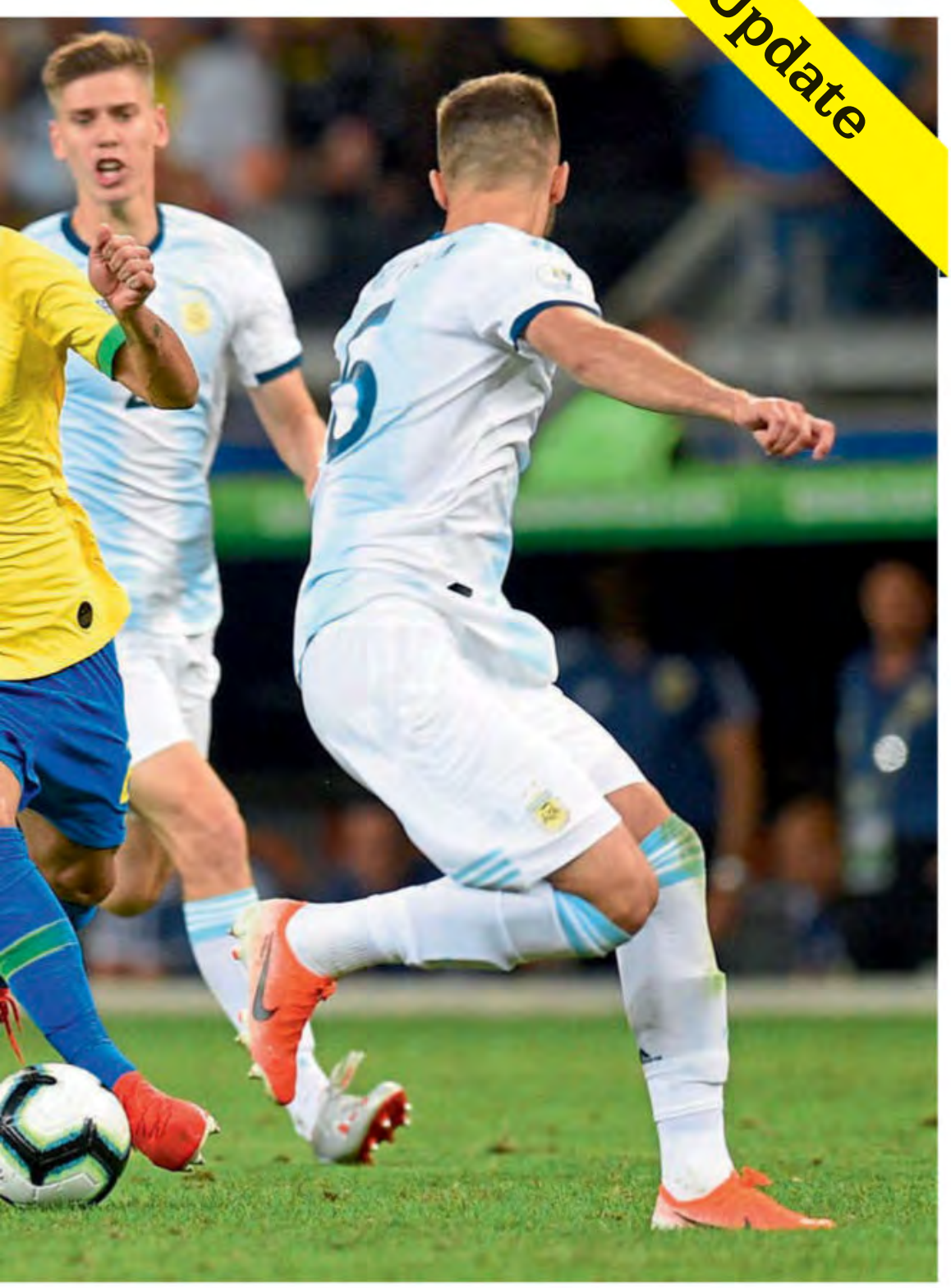
There is a feeling that Brazil have yet to recover from defeat to Belgium in Russia 2018. True, they won last year's Copa on home soil, but were rarely tested – and a run of poor results afterwards reinforced the point that the team have drifted from the standards of coach Tite's golden start in 2016-17.

Tite will have to use the qualifiers to find the right blend, especially in attack. But he has more than enough talent at his disposal for Brazil to be serious contenders in Qatar.

Argentina made a surprise – and principally, cheap – choice to climb out of the rubble of Russia 2018 by appointing the totally inexperienced Lionel Scaloni to coach the side and carry out a major rebuild. Lionel Messi is onside, which helps, and Argentina ended 2019 with some good results and the consolidation of some interesting players. The lack of top-class defenders remains a concern, but morale is high.

Uruguay were, statistically at least, the continent's best team in two of the last three World Cups, based on the excellent youth work carried out under long-term coach Oscar Tabarez. And it is this that gives them hope for the future. Even if strikers Luis Suarez and Edinson Cavani are past their best,

Update



Talent...Manchester City's Yangel Herrera is Venezuela's big hope

the team has options. The strength is now in midfield, and not having to play both strikers gives a release from 4-4-2 and the chance to play wingers. It would be a major surprise if they fall short of qualification.

THE NEXT RUNG

With the second-biggest population in the continent, Colombia have immense potential – outside the traditional trio they are the South American side most likely to win the World Cup. Vastly experienced Portuguese Carlos Queiroz is a fascinating choice of coach. Results have been mixed so far, with goals hard to come by and a lack of inspiration whenever James Rodriguez is missing. But they look good bets to qualify.

Ricardo Gareca's Peru may find it hard to give continuity to their surprise qualification for Russia 2018, especially as centre-forward Paolo Guerrero has suffered a long-term knee injury. Few youngsters of real quality are emerging – also a problem for Chile as they try to work out how, and even if, they can move beyond the golden generation that won them the Copa America in 2015 and 2016. Colombian coach Reinaldo Rueda is a smooth operator, but the task of renewal is tricky – as Paraguay found after reaching the 2010 quarter-finals. The Paraguayans are usually competitive. But do they have enough quality? And is Argentine coach Eduardo Berizzo, an ex-assistant to Marcelo Bielsa, a good fit for a team typically happiest in deep defence?

Midfield maestros... Uruguay's Rodrigo Bentancur and Federico Valverde

THE OTHERS

Ecuador seemed right on course for Russia 2018 until the wheels fell off, both on and off the field – and things have not improved. The return of coach Hernan Dario Gomez did not work out, an ambitious project with Jordi Cruyff failed to get off the ground, and Gustavo Alfaro from Argentina is a late replacement. He has a good track record with modest teams, though, which could fit Ecuador's counter-attacking style.

Venezuela's huge hopes of making their World Cup debut are largely based on the 2017 Under-20 team, although the resignation of coach Rafael Dudamel is a blow. His replacement, Jose Peseiro from Portugal, has yet to get together with his players. A canny Venezuelan, Cesar Farias, has taken charge of Bolivia. His Under-23 team at the start of the year were refreshingly bold, and he will work hard at using the altitude of La Paz, 3,600 metres above sea level, to their advantage – part of the challenge that makes World Cup qualification in South America so intriguing.

THE CONTENDERS

The ten teams vying for South America's four automatic World Cup qualifying berths

- Argentina
- Bolivia
- Brazil
- Chile
- Colombia
- Ecuador
- Paraguay
- Peru
- Uruguay
- Venezuela

CONCACAF World Cup Qualifiers

STEVE MENARY

Update

Pushed back

COVID-19 enforces change of format in CONCACAF

CONCACAF's rejig of the 2022 World Cup qualifiers assuaged some criticism in the region, but the big guns still have a head start. Changed due to the pandemic, the new format puts the five highest-ranked nations – Mexico, USA, Costa Rica, Jamaica and Honduras – straight into a final round, dubbed the Octagonal.

The remaining 30 eligible CONCACAF members play each other once in six groups, with games to commence in March 2021 after a late decision to postpone the original October and November dates. Group winners then play home-and-away for three places in the Octagonal, where the top three qualify for Qatar and the fourth-placed side faces an inter-confederation play-off.

The original format had lower-ranked countries battling off for one inter-confederation play-off spot, but the early rounds will still be a dogfight and dissatisfaction remains in the Caribbean, where many countries will look to their diaspora as FIFA redrafts its eligibility rules.

The changes will allow players with three or less caps won before they are 21 to switch nationality, but with the system still favouring the big guns, persuading players to switch will be a huge ask.

Captain...Curacao's Cuco Martina

LEADING CONTENDERS

The 2019 Gold Cup winners Mexico have stars with massive experience in captain Andres Guardado of Real Betis, Atletico Madrid's Hector Herrera and Wolves striker Raul Jimenez, and are favourites to win the Octagonal.

The USA ran them close in the Gold Cup final but coach Gregg Berhalter has had mixed results and will want to avoid a repeat of the 3-0 friendly hammering by Mexico in New Jersey last year.

Ronald Brenes only took up the reins at Costa Rica last year but has strength in depth with veteran Bryan Ruiz hoping for a third consecutive World Cup appearance. Maynor Figueroa is one of the few current internationals with more caps than Ruiz, and the Houston Dynamo defender will hope he can lead Honduras back to the World Cup after missing out in 2018.

The new format puts the five highest-ranked nations – Mexico, USA, Costa Rica, Jamaica and Honduras – straight into a final round, dubbed the Octagonal

Jamaica coach Theodore Whitmore has produced a strong run since his side lost to the USA in the Gold Cup semi-final last year. Whitmore played for The Reggae Boyz in their only finals' appearance in 1998 and his side should challenge for third place or the play-off spot.

Rising...Canada's Alphonso Davies

THE NEXT RUNG

Under veteran coach Guus Hiddink, Curacao are top seeds in Group C and the eligibility rule change will be a huge benefit to an already-experienced squad led by Cuco Martina, whose most recent clubs include Everton, Stoke and Feyenoord. Hiddink's stature and links with the Netherlands could unearth plenty more players there.

An easy draw makes Haiti massive favourites in Group E, while ex-Leeds United manager Thomas Christiansen will struggle to hold onto his job if Panama fail to qualify from Group D. Trinidad & Tobago are top seeds in Group F but coach Terry Fenwick's task is not helped by a battle with FIFA for control of football on the islands.

INTERESTING OUTSIDERS

St. Kitts & Nevis must fancy their chances of beating T&T to top spot in Group F. The federation has a UK scouting system in place and, under former coach Jacques Passy, the players gained valuable experience playing on tours in Europe. New Argentine coach Claudio Caimi has an inspiring leader in West Bromwich Albion playmaker Romaine Sawyers.

Passy has since joined the Dominican Republic, whose players benefit from the island's new professional league. Captain Miguel Lloyd Troncosco was able to come home to Cibao from a seven-year stint with Panamanian side Arabe Unido and will provide valuable insight on Group D rivals Panama.

The biggest surprise could be Suriname, who had already changed their own eligibility rules to recruit players from a massive Dutch diaspora. So far, coach Dean Gorre has only used

Hapoel Be'er Sheva striker Nigel Hasselbaink, but Galatasaray centre-half Ryan Donk and former Feyenoord defender Kelvin Leerdam could help challenge favourites Canada in Group B, who have Alphonso Davies and Jonathan David, stand-out performers in Europe in 2019-20, in their ranks.

THE REST

Grenada and Antigua & Barbuda have big diasporas but both were without a coach when the draw was made and look unlikely to challenge top seeds El Salvador in Group A.

Bermuda qualified for their first Gold Cup last year and will provide tougher competition in Group B if European-based players such as the talismanic Nahki Wells of Bristol City are available.

Guyana also made their Gold Cup debut last year and will look to Europe. Persuading West Ham right-back Ryan Fredericks to ditch England aspirations may be hard, but Brazilian coach Marcio Maximo will believe Trinidad's travails make the Octagonal a realistic target.

For most other small sides, such as the British Virgin Islands, these matches are about blooding young players before the 2026 World Cup, when hosts USA, Canada and Mexico will be absent from the qualifiers and a real opportunity may finally present itself.

Target...Ryan Fredericks is eligible for Guyana, as well as England and Scotland

THE DRAW

CONCACAF's pre-octagon first round of qualifying

GROUP A

- El Salvador
- Antigua & Barbuda
- Grenada
- Montserrat
- US Virgin Islands

GROUP B

- Canada
- Suriname
- Bermuda
- Cayman Islands
- Aruba

GROUP C

- Curacao
- Guatemala
- St. Vincent & Grenadines
- Cuba
- British Virgin Islands

GROUP D

- Panama
- Dominican Republic
- Barbados
- Dominica
- Anguilla

GROUP E

- Haiti
- Nicaragua
- Belize
- St. Lucia
- Turks & Caicos Islands

GROUP F

- Trinidad & Tobago
- St. Kitts & Nevis
- Guyana
- Puerto Rico
- Bahamas

Africa World Cup Qualifiers

MARK GLEESON

POT 1	POT 2	POT 3
SENEGAL	BURKINA FASO	MADAGASCAR
TUNISIA	CÔTE D'IVOIRE	MAURITANIA
NIGERIA	SOUTH AFRICA	LIBYA
ALGERIA	GUINEA	MOZAMBIQUE
MOROCCO	UGANDA	KENYA
GHANA	CAPE VERDE	CENTRAL AFRICAN REP.
EGYPT	GABON	ZIMBABWE
CAMEROON	BENIN	NIGER
MALI	ZAMBIA	NAMIBIA
CONGO DR	CONGO	GUINEA-BISSAU

Waiting...No qualifiers have taken place since January's draw

The wait goes on

African World Cup 2022 qualifiers delayed

It is an old cliché that six months in sport can prove an eternity. In African football it can be even longer.

That holds particularly true for the World Cup qualifying process, which was set to resume in November with the start of the group phase, but which has since been postponed to next June.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been harshly felt across Africa, with borders firmly closed from the lockdown in March right through towards the end of the year, with none of the easing of travel restrictions that was seen across the European summer and allowed European football to return to action over a brief hiatus.

What it means for Africa, is that there will likely be much change by the time the 40 countries, who are still in contention for the five African places at the 2022 World Cup finals, return to the race to Qatar.

Underdogs...Angola forward Gelson Dala

They have been divided into ten groups of four, with the ten winners advancing to two-legged play-offs to decide who qualifies. It is a return to the qualifying procedure used for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil with the final play-off round providing a dramatic finale.

The delay until mid-2021 comes after the Confederation of African Football decided it wanted to complete the qualifiers for the next Africa Cup of Nations finals first. They would have been done by now with the finals set for January, but the coronavirus has moved that all back 12 months.

There are still four rounds of Nations Cup qualifiers to be completed and they have now been scheduled for November and March – two matches each per window.

The World Cup preliminaries can then only resume in the next international window in June and are extended now through to March 2022.

Africa kicked off the race for places in Qatar in September 2019, with the

Update

African champions... Algeria's Ismael Bennacer with the Nations Cup trophy

Knocked out...All five African teams failed to get out of their groups at the last World Cup

bottom 28 countries on the FIFA rankings playing off over two legs to produce 14 winners to go into the group phase where they have been joined by the top 26 ranked national teams.

Somalia were minutes away from a shock win over Zimbabwe who scrambled in two late goals to rescue themselves, but for the rest there were no upsets. 2006 World Cup qualifiers Angola and Togo both slipped significantly down the rankings that they had to go through the ignominy of competing in the preliminary round last year, but both progressed with an element of comfort.

It meant all 13 African countries who have previously been to a World Cup are involved in the group phase of the 2022 qualifiers, although after difficult draws for both of them, neither Angola nor Togo look in any way capable of recreating their giant-killing acts of the 2006 qualifiers.

The last World Cup in Russia proved a disaster for the image of the African game, with no teams advancing past the first stage in the worst return for Africa since the 1982 finals in Spain.

Just how the continent's representatives will fare in 2022 is anyone's guess at this stage, but it is the same contenders who look well set for places in Qatar.

Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal and Tunisia have all been handed draws they were well pleased with and can be expected to advance to the play-off round.

Algeria, who reached the second round in Brazil but did not qualify for Russia, have since won the Nations Cup and have been tasked with what seems a routine assignment in Group A, which includes tiny Djibouti, playing at a level they have no prior experience of.

But Cameroon and the Ivory Coast have been drawn together in Group D in a combustible mix, while Ghana and South Africa will go straight from competing against each other in the same Nations Cup qualifying group to battling again to determine who emerges top of Group G.

In Group J, the Democratic Republic of Congo (who were then Zaire when they competed at the 1974 finals in the then West Germany) are the only past finalists in a group where their three challengers – Benin, Madagascar and Tanzania – all have every right to believe they could advance to the last round of qualifiers.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been harshly felt across Africa, with borders firmly closed from the lockdown in March right through towards the end of the year

Group E, with Kenya, Mali, Rwanda and Uganda, is the only one of the ten groups without a past World Cup finalist, offering its winner a chance to move close to reaching the previously unattainable. Mali will be fancied over their east African rivals even if the country is wracked by political and security instability.

THE DRAW

Africa's second round of World Cup qualifying

GROUP A
- Algeria
- Burkina Faso
- Niger
- Djibouti

GROUP B
- Tunisia
- Zambia
- Mauritania
- Equatorial Guinea

GROUP C
- Nigeria
- Cape Verde
- Central African Republic
- Liberia

GROUP D
- Cameroon
- Ivory Coast
- Mozambique
- Malawi

GROUP E
- Mali
- Uganda
- Kenya
- Rwanda

GROUP F
- Egypt
- Gabon
- Libya
- Angola

GROUP G
- Ghana
- South Africa
- Zimbabwe
- Ethiopia

GROUP H
- Senegal
- Congo
- Namibia
- Togo

GROUP I
- Morocco
- Guinea
- Guinea-Bissau
- Sudan

GROUP J
- DR Congo
- Benin
- Madagascar
- Tanzania

Asia World Cup Qualifiers

JOHN DUERDEN

Up against it

AFC running out of time to complete World Cup qualifiers

There was some jealousy in Asia when, on August 25, European coaches started naming squads for the Nations League. There hasn't been any Asian international action since last November and won't be any until March – at least that is the hope.

"2021 is going to be crazy and that's if everything goes well," said one Asian Football Confederation (AFC) official in August. It was just after the organisation decided to postpone the four 2022 World Cup qualifiers that were supposed to take place in October and November to 2021, games that had already been pushed back from March and June.

Coronavirus has played havoc with Asia's World Cup qualification, a campaign that should be approaching the final stages by now. Instead, 40 Asian teams are still on the road to Qatar in the second round of qualification. The eight group winners will progress to the third stage along with the four best runners-up. That final dozen will be divided into two groups of six with the top two from each going to the World Cup – and then there are play-offs too.

At this point we should have a decent idea of which teams would make Qatar. The original schedule would have seen Asia halfway through the final round of qualification by the end of 2020. Instead there are still four games remaining in the second stage. That leaves 14 qualifiers and four play-offs still to be negotiated.

In-form...Japan forward Takumi Minamino has five goals in qualifying

Leaders...Australia have a 100% record so far in qualifying

It won't end by next summer as was the plan. Those extra months given by the 2022 World Cup's controversial switch from June to November are going to come in very useful.

It all leaves a lot of football to squeeze into 2021 and it is unlikely to happen. Unlike Europe, where there are fewer games in qualification to start with, it is not so easy to add extra matchdays to FIFA windows in Asia.

Travel is the toughest challenge. Four years ago, Australia racked up around 250,000 kilometres on the road to Russia. Direct flights between east and west Asia (of which there aren't that many outside Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) can take up to 12 hours.

Federations are bracing themselves with Australia, as always, facing more challenges than most. In 2021, Socceroos coach Graham Arnold also has the Copa America and the Tokyo Olympics to fit in.

"Next year we may have 14 World Cup qualifiers and what's ahead of us will be the toughest qualifying programme we have ever had, no doubt about that, but we are very confident and looking forward to the challenge," Arnold said. "This time we will have two matches at every window so we will be playing a lot more football at home and abroad. Which is why depth will be more important than it has ever been."

> "2021 is going to be crazy and that's if everything goes well"

Arnold is correct to be concerned. Australia have important players in Europe, as do his counterparts in Iran, South Korea and Japan. These players, often the best that Asia have to offer, are going to come under strain as will the relationships between club and Asian national team coaches.

The English Premier League, for

Update

Knackered...Son Heung-min will have a heavy workload in 2021

example, is squeezing 38 games into a season that is a month shorter than usual. To have the likes of Son Heung-min tearing around European pitches and then facing mammoth trips all around Asia is not going to keep the continent's star player fresh. His international boss, Paulo Bento, needs him just as much – if not more so – as his club boss, Jose Mourinho.

Some teams are better off than others. Australia have been perfect so far in the second round and would really have to slip up not to finish top and go to the next stage. They may be able to take things a little easier than some others such as South Korea. The Taeguk Warriors should end up topping their group but still have work to do as, after draws with North Korea and Lebanon, they are behind Turkmenistan.

China, eight points behind Syria, are already out of the running for first and hoping to secure a best runner-up spot. In normal times, the Chinese Super League would stop for the best part of a month for the final four clashes. That may not be possible now but that is a problem for next year – as is everything else.

Momentum...Vietnam are attempting to qualify for their first World Cup

It should be pointed out that this hectic schedule depends on there being no further waves of coronavirus. A full to bursting calendar may be demanding but it is better than none at all.

THE STANDINGS

Asia's World Cup qualifying group stage is already underway

GROUP A

	P	W	D	L	Pts
Syria	5	5	0	0	15
China	4	2	1	1	7
Philippines	5	2	1	2	7
Maldives	5	2	0	3	6
Guam	5	0	0	5	0

GROUP B

	P	W	D	L	Pts
Australia	4	4	0	0	12
Kuwait	5	3	1	1	10
Jordan	5	3	1	1	10
Nepal	5	1	0	4	3
Chinese Taipei	5	0	0	5	0

GROUP C

	P	W	D	L	Pts
Iraq	5	3	2	0	11
Bahrain	5	2	3	0	9
Iran	4	2	0	2	6
Hong Kong	5	1	2	2	5
Cambodia	5	0	1	4	1

GROUP D

	P	W	D	L	Pts
Uzbekistan	5	3	0	2	9
Saudi Arabia	4	2	2	0	8
Singapore	5	2	1	2	7
Yemen	5	1	2	2	5
Palestine	5	1	1	3	4

GROUP E

	P	W	D	L	Pts
Qatar	5	4	1	0	13
Oman	5	4	0	1	12
Afghanistan	5	1	1	3	4
India	5	0	3	2	3
Bangladesh	4	0	1	3	1

GROUP F

	P	W	D	L	Pts
Japan	4	4	0	0	12
Kyrgyzstan	5	2	1	2	7
Tajikistan	5	2	1	2	7
Myanmar	5	2	0	3	6
Mongolia	5	1	0	4	3

GROUP G

	P	W	D	L	Pts
Vietnam	5	3	2	0	11
Malaysia	5	3	0	2	9
Thailand	5	2	2	1	8
UAE	4	2	0	2	6
Indonesia	5	0	0	5	0

GROUP H

	P	W	D	L	Pts
Turkmenistan	5	3	0	2	9
South Korea	4	2	2	0	8
Lebanon	5	2	2	1	8
North Korea	5	2	2	1	8
Sri Lanka	5	0	0	5	0

AUGUST 15-SEPTEMBER 11, 2020

Global diary

Stories from the four corners of the football world

Saturday August 15

AFRICA: Due to travel restrictions across parts of Africa as a result of coronavirus, the qualifiers for the Under-20 Women's World Cup in Costa Rica and Panama 2020, scheduled for September, are postponed.
PORTUGAL: Manchester City are dumped out of the Champions League after a 3-1 defeat to Lyon, with Moussa Dembele scoring twice for the French side.

Sunday August 16

GERMANY: Manchester United's Europa League campaign is brought to an end by Sevilla, after Bruno Fernandes' ninth-minute penalty is cancelled out by goals from Suso and Luuk de Jong.
ENGLAND: Manchester City's Kevin De Bruyne is named the Premier League Player of the Season for 2019-20.

Monday August 17

USA: US Soccer announces that the 2020 Lamar Hunt US Open Cup has been cancelled due to COVID-19.
GERMANY: Internazionale reach the Europa League final with an emphatic 5-0 victory over Shakhtar Donetsk, with Romelu Lukaku becoming the first player to score in ten consecutive matches in the competition.

Tuesday August 18

PERU: Peruvian football resumes just 11 days after being suspended for the second time following one match being played in the seventh round of the Apertura.
PORTUGAL: Paris Saint-Germain book their place in the Champions League final with a comfortable 3-0 win over RB Leipzig, thanks to goals by Marquinhos, Angel Di Maria and Juan Bernat.
EUROPE: The 2020-21 Champions League first qualifying round begins, with Celtic, Qarabag and Red Star Belgrade among the teams to advance.

Wednesday August 19

FIFA: FIFA's Ethics Committee decide to close its case against president Gianni Infantino.
PORTUGAL: Bayern Munich join PSG in the Champions League final by also winning 3-0, eliminating Lyon with a brace from Serge Gnabry.

Thursday August 20

JAPAN: J.League leaders Kawasaki Frontale achieve a new record of ten consecutive league victories by beating Cerezo Osaka.
FIFA: Haitian Football Federation president Yves Jean-Bart's suspension for alleged sexual abuse is extended.

Upset...Ferencvaros staff celebrate after beating a dejected Celtic

Europa League hero...De Jong

Friday August 21

USA: Chicago Fire announce that one of their players has tested positive for coronavirus.
JORDAN: Football activity is suspended in Jordan for 14 days after five Al Faisaly players test positive for coronavirus.
GERMANY: Sevilla win a record sixth Europa League title by beating Inter 3-2. Romelu Lukaku extends his scoring record to 11 games in a row, before adding the winning goal at the wrong end.
FRANCE: The 2020-21 Ligue 1 season begins with a goalless draw between Bordeaux and Nantes. The intended clash between Marseille and Saint-Etienne was postponed after four Marseille players tested positive for coronavirus.
NETHERLANDS: NAC Breda legend Jacques Visschers passes away at the age of 79.

Saturday August 22

USA: Inter Miami open their new home stadium by beating local rivals Orlando City 3-2, for their first Major League Soccer win.
CHINA: Fans return to competitive football in China as Shanghai SIPG come from behind to beat Beijing FC 2-1 at the Suzhou Olympic Sports Centre.
EGYPT: Zamalek defeat arch rivals Al Ahly 3-1 in the Egyptian Premier League at Cairo International Stadium.

Sunday August 23

CHINA: The 2020 season of the Chinese Women's Super League gets underway.
PORTUGAL: Kingsley Coman's header gives Bayern Munich a 1-0 victory over Paris Saint-Germain to hand the Germans their sixth Champions League title and second treble in their history.

Monday August 24

USA: New England Revolution head coach Bruce Arena is suspended for an additional two games and is issued a $15,000 fine for unacceptable conduct and use of inappropriate language.

Tuesday August 25

CONCACAF: The 2020 Caribbean Club Shield in Curacao, and 2020 Flow Caribbean Club Championship in Dominican Republic are cancelled.
ENGLAND: Harry Maguire is found guilty of aggravated assault, resisting arrest and attempted bribery by a Greek court, and handed a suspended prison sentence. The following day he lodges an appeal.
ITALY: In his first press conference, new Juventus head coach Andrea Pirlo reveals that striker Gonzalo Higuain will be leaving the club.

Wednesday August 26

QATAR: The Asian Football Confederation receives the Qatar Football Association's bid to ➤

Guinea-Bissau

STEVE MENARY

Banned

FIFA ban for former president sparks chaos at federation

Guinea-Bissau...The team at last year's AFCON

Manuel Nascimento is a vocal critic of the Confederation of African Football and FIFA's attempts to exert greater control over CAF, but the world body's attempts to sideline the controversial president of Guinea-Bissau's Football Federation (FFGB) look to have backfired.

Once an African football backwater, Guinea-Bissau's qualification for their debut Africa Cup of Nations in 2017 and a second successive appearance last year gave Nascimento a platform to voice concerns over alleged corruption in CAF.

Known locally as Manuelino, Nascimento also supported Jerome Champagne as a rival candidate to Gianni Infantino in the 2016 FIFA presidential elections, but frequently ran into problems at home.

These ranged from a rebellion by clubs over financial irregularities that caused the 2018 Campeonato Nacional to be postponed, to allegedly firing a pistol at academy owner, Adile 'Kaby' Sebastiao.

Complaints by the clubs drew no response from FIFA, who finally intervened this summer. Nascimento was handed a decade-long ban from football for his alleged role in a mob justice incident, when a mobile phone thief was trapped in a tyre and threatened with petrol.

Nascimento was handed a decade-long ban from football for his alleged role in a mob justice incident, when a mobile phone thief was trapped in a tyre and threatened with petrol

Banned...Manuel Nascimento

A video clip of the incident spread via social media, prompting the FIFA ban, which was issued on the eve of the FFGB elections with Nascimento running for a third term of office.

Nascimento claims he was helping free the thief and the ban has boosted his standing in the former Portuguese colony. "Now 70 per cent of the people here support him," says Causo Seidi, president of second-tier side Mansaba.

At a hastily convened meeting on August 8 at the Hotel Ledger in Bissau, a vote was held for a new president, but only 25 of the FFGB's 38 members attended due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Eight of the FFGB members that were allegedly at the election then subsequently contested the poll's validity. "No one was accredited to take part in the said congress," said Pelundo vice-president Erriosto Mendes.

The Guinea-Bissau Sports Medicine Association, the referee's association AGAF and clubs including Mavegro, Quinara, Sport Bissau e Benfica and Porto de Bissau also claimed no one from their organisation who was there was eligible to vote.

The country's electoral commission annulled the result and local election rules say three months' notice must be given before a new vote is held, which means waiting until November although some clubs want an earlier poll.

Carlos Teixeira... FFGB presidential candidate

Nascimento could run again as in August he travelled to Europe to lodge an appeal at the Court of Arbitration for Sport against his ban and 100,000 Swiss francs fine. "I really don't know if am going to stand for it again," said Nascimento. "Because our CAF presently is composed by [a] corrupt president who doesn't care about football and its development."

The favourite is Carlos Teixeira, known as Caito, a former international who played professionally in Portugal and Switzerland. "If I'm not running for it, I think to support [Caito] strongly," says Nascimento.

Last season was abandoned due to COVID and the 2020-21 Campeonato Nacional is due to start in October, but even if football does resume there may be little change if Caito wins with Nascimento active in the background.

Trinidad & Tobago

LASANA LIBURD

A clumsy, chaotic Caribbean coup

Gianni Infantino goes head-to-head with Trinidadian courts

In one corner, you have Gianni Infantino: president of the billion dollar world governing football body, FIFA. In the other, a recently retired school teacher, William Wallace, whose organisation, the Trinidad and Tobago Football Association (TTFA), is functionally bankrupt.

If this were boxing, it would be difficult to get this supposed mismatch sanctioned. And yet, six months after FIFA threw the first blow by declaring that Wallace had been removed as president – via the Infantino-headed Bureau of the FIFA Council – the TTFA president is still standing, to no small embarrassment of FIFA's.

Suspicious of the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), FIFA's preferred referee, Wallace invited the governing body to see them in a Trinidad courtroom instead. Their legal claim is that FIFA has no authority to "normalise" the Trinidad and Tobago association and eject its elected officers, just four months after taking office.

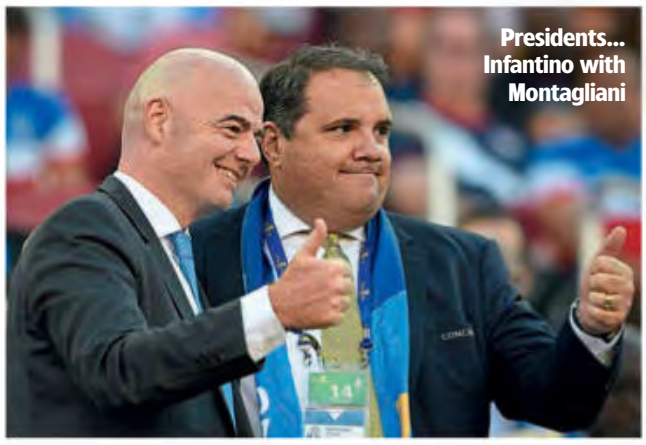
Surprisingly, Infantino followed them to the Port of Spain High Court. The result was seismic. It was the mouse that roared.

"FIFA may yet have to justify its purported assumption of extraordinary power to control the day-to-day affairs of TTFA," stated Madame Justice Carol Gobin, in her ruling on August 13.

"Moreover it is outwith the jurisdiction of an entity incorporated under our legislation to agree to submit to foreign law as FIFA Statutes prescribe...FIFA could not presume to be above the law."

FIFA has already lodged an appeal. Outside the

Thrashed...T&T were beaten 6-0 by USA at last year's Gold Cup


Presidents... Infantino with Montagliani

courtroom, though, they are resorting to less sophisticated measures. Secretary general Fatma Samoura vowed to open internal proceedings for sanction against the TTFA, if Wallace does not withdraw his court case by mid-September. Trinidad and Tobago must submit, according to FIFA, or be broken.

But how did it come to this?

Well, on November 18, 2019, Infantino flew to Trinidad to speak on a red-letter day for then TTFA president David John-Williams. It was the opening of his controversial Home of Football project.

In truth, during John-Williams' five-year tenure, the TTFA's debt soared from $2.6 million to $7m and counting, while the Soca Warriors' FIFA ranking slid from 49th to 104th; their only win in the last 18 months came against the world's lowest-ranked side, Anguilla.

The facility that Infantino "opened" remains unfinished. When the FIFA president cut the ribbon, the "hotel" did not have its own power source, insurance for commercial purposes or even a proper kitchen. At present, it is being used to house COVID-19 patients and, even for that purpose, it required significant sprucing up by the government.

Trinidad and Tobago must submit, according to FIFA, or be broken. But how did it come to this?

Meanwhile, John-Williams is yet to produce receipts for over $2m spent during its construction.

Six days after Infantino's speech, Trinidad and Tobago's football delegates voted Wallace into office by a margin of 26 to 20.

Four months later, the Bureau of the FIFA Council ejected Wallace, citing: "Extremely low overall financial management methods, combined with a massive debt."

Wallace had not even had time to do his first balance sheet, nor had he received a cent in due FIFA Forward funding.

This, of course, is the "what" rather than the "why".

Infantino and John-Williams have history. When the Swiss-Italian campaigned to replace Sepp Blatter as FIFA president, John-Williams broke ranks with the Caribbean Football Union (CFU) to endorse him.

A year later, John-Williams showed letters of support from UEFA and CONCACAF when he ran for CFU president. He failed to dislodge Antiguan incumbent Gordon Derrick. But, within months, FIFA moved Derrick anyway – through an ethics committee charge based on a supposed conflict of interest committed between two-and-a-half to six years prior.

Caribbean officials who appear to stand in Infantino's way tend not to last long.

Former FIFA presidents trusted Caribbean men like Jack Warner and Jeffrey Webb to run the region for them, arguably as little more than vote farms.

These days, CONCACAF is in the hands of Canadian Victor Montagliani, which makes the balance of power even more susceptible to ripples.

If FIFA had doubts about whether they could work with the new men in charge of the TTFA, they were unlikely to have been assuaged on January 22, 2020, when general secretary Ramesh Ramdhan vowed to probe the Home of Football project and publicise the findings.

"I knew you were a central figure during the construction phase of this project," Ramdhan wrote to FIFA chief member association official Veron Mosengo-Omba. "I am of the view that FIFA has indeed been compromised in this scenario...The manner in which the project was being managed should have raised red flags.

"Given the revelations, it is curious and even suspicious that the project continued uninterrupted."

If Ramdhan did have incriminating documents, then, by seizing control of the TTFA's offices, FIFA now has it under its thumb.

Trinidad and Tobago has been burnt already by "dodgy" FIFA presidents and their bullying local consigliere. They do not want "another Jack Warner," and have shown more appetite for a fight than anticipated, although the fear of a suspension is turning the heat up considerably in the tropical twin island republic.

Is Infantino bluffing? Or will the Soca Warriors sleep with the fishes?

Either way, Infantino will not be remembered well for his clumsy, chaotic Caribbean coup.

Home of football...Infantino with John-Williams at last year's Home of Football opening

host the AFC Asian Cup 2027.

USA: Five Major League Soccer fixtures are postponed in the wake of protests following the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

TUNISIA: The long-awaited Tunis derby between century long rivals, Club Africain and Esperance, ends in a goalless draw.

SCOTLAND: Celtic are stunned in the Champions League qualifiers, with Hungarian side Ferencvaros winning 2-1 at Celtic Park.

NETHERLANDS: Ajax defender Daley Blind collapses during a friendly against Hertha Berlin but later says he is "feeling fine".

Thursday August 27

LIBERIA: The Liberian Football Association announces the contract extension of national team coach Peter Butler.

SOUTH AFRICA: Mamelodi Sundowns give themselves a great chance of winning a third South African league title in a row by beating Kaizer Chiefs.

FRANCE: Midfielder Paul Pogba tests positive for coronavirus, ruling him out of France's UEFA Nations League clashes.

Friday August 28

MALAYSIA: More than five months since the Malaysia Super League was brought to a halt, football in the Southeast Asian country resumes.

Saturday August 29

USA: Orlando City pick up their first win against Southeast rivals Atlanta United, relying on two first-half goals to land a 3-1 win at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

ENGLAND: Millie Bright and Erin Cuthbert goals see Chelsea beat Manchester City 2-0 to win the Women's Community Shield – the first double-header with the men's clash, which sees Arsenal beat Liverpool on penalties.

CHILE: Chilean professional football resumes without the public and under strict sanitary measures, after the suspension of all championships in March due to the coronavirus pandemic.

SAUDI ARABIA: Al Hilal win the 2019-20 Saudi Pro League title with two matches to spare thanks to a 4-1 victory over Al Hazm.

Sunday August 30

USA: Real Salt Lake owner Dell Loy Hansen announces that he

➤ will be selling Utah Soccer Holdings, which owns Real Salt Lake (MLS), Utah Royals (NWSL), and Real Monarchs (USL).
AUSTRALIA: Rhyan Grant scores the only goal for Premiers Sydney FC against Melbourne City, to add the Grand Final trophy to their A-League Championship title.
SPAIN: Lyon win their seventh Women's Champions League title by beating Wolfsburg 3-1 at the Anoeta Stadium in San Sebastian.
BRAZIL: Gremio win the Gaucho tournament for the third season in a row after beating Caxias 3-2 on aggregate.
TUNISIA: Tunisian giants Esperance clinch their 30th league title victory after drawing 1-1 with Chebba.
TANZANIA: National league champions Simba edge out Namungo 2-0 to capture the Community Shield title in Arusha.

Monday August 31

KUWAIT: Kuwait SC bag their 16th Kuwait Premier League title following a 4-1 hammering of Al Salmiya.
ITALY: Milan's Zlatan Ibrahimovic ends speculation over his future by signing a new contract to keep him at the San Siro for another year.

Wednesday September 2

CONCACAF: World Cup 2022 hosts Qatar are announced as a guest competitor in the 2021 CONCACAF Gold Cup.
UAE: The 2020-21 United Arab Emirates Pro League season kick-off is pushed back to October.
BRAZIL: The Brazilian FA announces that their men's and women's teams will be paid equally.

Thursday September 3

FRANCE: Neymar tests positive for coronavirus, along with two other PSG team-mates. Meanwhile, the City Football Group completes the purchase of Ligue 2 side Troyes.
QATAR: Al Duhail begin their defence of the Qatar Stars League title, just two weeks after being crowned the 2019-20 champions.
IRAN: Tractor win the Hazfi Cup for the second time in the tournament's history, defeating Esteghlal 3-2 in the final.
CHINA: The Chinese Football Association announces that the second phase of the Chinese Super League will continue in Dalian and Suzhou from October 16. ➤

South America

TIM VICKERY

A new set of problems

Football's return brings plenty of headaches

The continent that brought us love in the time of cholera has been ploughing ahead with football in the time of coronavirus.

The pandemic has posed serious problems for South America. Indeed, the presidents of the Bolivian and Venezuelan FAs lost their lives to COVID-19. The virus has proved hard to bring under control. In early September, South America contained all of the top five in the ranking of coronavirus deaths per population size over the previous week.

But the continent's football often lives close to the financial edge even in normal times. A long shutdown put a massive strain on the health of the industry and increased the pressure for a return to action. Watching football's restart in Europe only served to scratch the itch still further, and by the start of September, six of the ten national leagues in South America were up and running, with Colombia set to make it seven in the middle of the month.

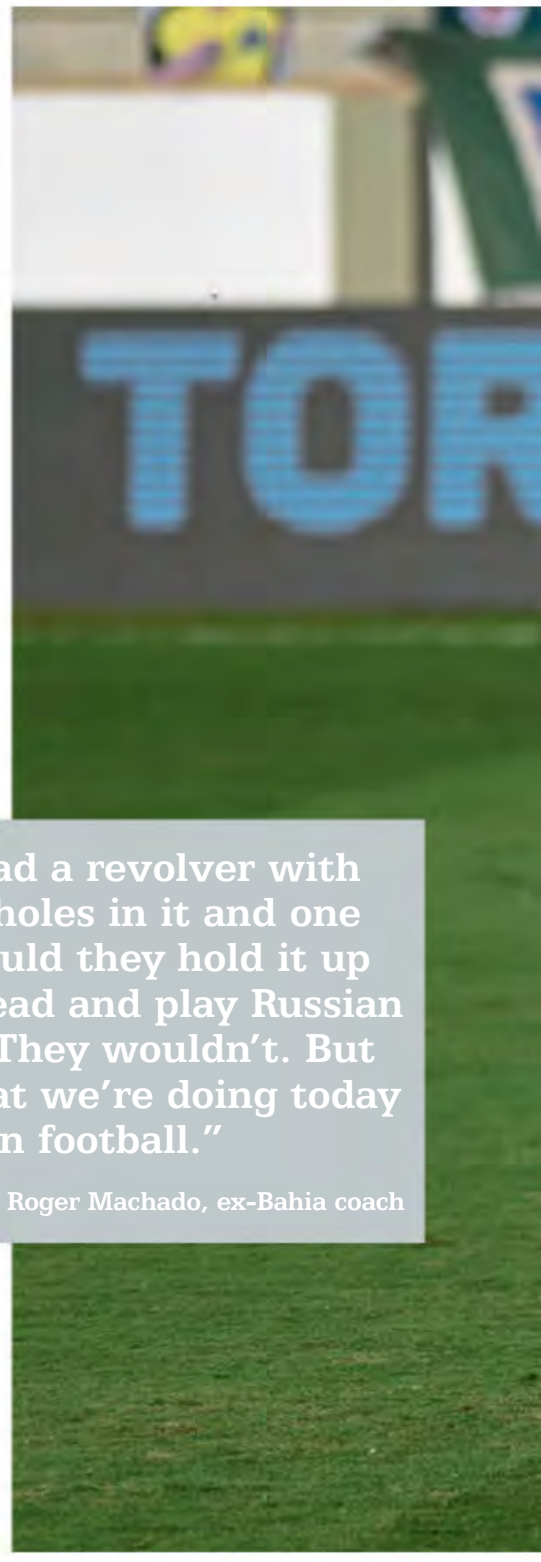
The major European leagues were able to wait until coronavirus had been brought under control and then improvise a climax to their competitions. The circumstances in South America are very different. The administrators have had to plan entire competitions in an environment where the virus is still raging – increasing the risks and the problems.

In the opening round of the Brazilian Championship on August 9, the match between Goias and Sao Paulo was called off four minutes before kick-off. As many as ten Goias players had tested positive for the virus. It was hardly surprising that this made some of the players feel uneasy.

Roger Machado, who was sacked as coach by Bahia in September, admitted in August: "We are anxious and worried. And from the moment that the Brazilian Championship started, with players testing positive, with all the travelling we have to do, this is not going to go away. It's being said that 2.5 per cent of those who get the virus will develop serious complications. I ask those who organise the league if they had a revolver with 50 bullet holes in it and one bullet, would they hold it up to their head and play Russian roulette? They wouldn't. But that's what we're doing today in Brazilian football."

And the players and their families are perhaps not the main cause of concern. At least the players have testing facilities readily available. More worrying is the case of the fans. All games are currently being played behind closed doors – but inside the stadium is not the only place that supporters can gather.

> "If they had a revolver with 50 bullet holes in it and one bullet, would they hold it up to their head and play Russian roulette? They wouldn't. But that's what we're doing today in Brazilian football."
>
> Roger Machado, ex-Bahia coach



Off...The referee leaves the pitch after Goias v Sao Paulo is postponed at the last minute

Peru has taken special measures to restart its championship, bringing all the teams to the capital city of Lima in a bid to simplify the sanitation process. But they ran into problems in the first weekend. One game had to be cancelled after almost the entire Binacional side tested positive. And worse, the inaugural game, featuring local giants Universitario, turned into a near riot outside the stadium as thousands of fans flocked to stage a party. The restart was quickly suspended, and only resumed after a two-week cooling off period while people were reminded that this was a time for fans to cheer on their teams from their own homes.

But this, too, has its problems. The media model in South America often uses cable TV or pay-per-view to broadcast the games. Many fans, of course, cannot afford these services. The tendency is, then, to flock to bars to follow the action. It is not only mass parties outside grounds that can be vectors for the transmission of the virus. People gathering in bars is a less noisy risk, but at least as insidious. The return

Outspoken...Ex-Bahia coach Roger Machado

of football is both a morale boost and a health risk.

Indeed, one of the big headaches caused by the coronavirus in South America is the difficulty of social isolation in an environment where people are often packed tight together.

One of the directors of Bolivia's FA, Adrian Monje, made this point to explain why there is as yet no restart date for the local championship – even though Bolivian clubs will be involved in the Copa Libertadores from the middle of September. With the health protocols in place, he could be sure that, like Europe, players will have very limited contact with other people. "But in our domestic football only about 20 per cent of players have their own cars. The rest use public transport, taxis, and the youngest take micros." Tiny buses where passengers are crammed in, where the coronavirus can spread unchecked.

Palmeiras party...Luiz Adriano celebrates after a late equaliser against early pace-setters Internacional

Qatar

JOHN DUERDEN

Home comforts

The 2022 World Cup hosts' biggest footballing talents continue to stay at home

It was quite a season for Iranian strikers in Europe. Zenit's Sardar Azmoun finished joint-top scorer in the Russian Premier League; Mehdi Taremi did the same in Portugal and has promptly been snapped up by Porto; while only three players scored more than Kaveh Rezaei in Belgium. For a national team whose recent relative success was built on a strong defence, these are encouraging signs.

If only Arabian nations in West Asia could say the same. The biggest and best talents in Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates tend to stay at home, where they are lauded and paid very well. Even those that still wished to leave often had dreams dashed by all-powerful owners reluctant to lose their biggest stars.

Qatar were supposed to be different. A few years ago it seemed that the 2022 World Cup hosts knew that their best chance of success in their first appearance on the global stage was to give the national team as much international exposure as possible. As well as Copa America invitations, there were efforts to send players to Europe.

In 2019, it all seemed to be coming together. It started with a spectacular Asian Cup triumph and ended with Akram Afif, who managed ten assists in that tournament win, being named Asian Player of the Year. The 23-year-old winger spent 2015-18 playing for Eupen in Belgium and then Sporting Gijon in Spain.

Abdelkarim Hassan, 2018 Asian Player of the Year, also spent time in Belgium, and it was assumed that the full-back would go on to play on bigger stages.

The duo were expected to return to Europe soon after the Asian Cup finished, but that has not been the case. In fact, in July both Afif and Hassan signed new long-term deals with Qatari powerhouse Al Sadd.

Playmaker...Akram Afif

"I am delighted with the renewal of the contract, and I will strive to give everything I have to meet the aspirations of the administration, the coaching staff and the fans," Afif said. "I hope to give my best in the upcoming challenges, at home and in Asia, and compete for all titles."

At least, Hassan sounded like he was still interested in expanding his horizons. "I also thank the Al Sadd management for leaving the doors of European professionalism open to me during the next period, upon the arrival of an offer that suits my potential and ambition."

Champions...Qatar won the AFC Asian Cup in February 2019

Friday September 4

ENGLAND: The Premier League announces that it has terminated its £564 million TV contract in China, later agreeing to a new broadcast deal which covers the rest of the 2020-21 season.
QATAR: Santi Cazorla scores a stunning goal on his Al Sadd debut in a 5-1 victory over Al Kharaitiyat.

Saturday September 5

CHINA: Cameroon forward John Mary and his club Shenzhen allege that he was racially abused during a Chinese Super League match against Shanghai Shenhua.
ENGLAND: The new Women's Super League season begins, with Manchester City beating newly-promoted Aston Villa 2-0 thanks to a brace from Georgia Stanway.

Sunday September 6

ENGLAND: Wolves sign experienced Brazilian left-back Marcal from Lyon for €2m.

Monday September 7

ICELAND: England youngsters Phil Foden and Mason Greenwood are sent home from international duty after breaking COVID lockdown rules.
NORTHERN IRELAND: Erling Haaland and Alexander Sorloth bag a brace each as Norway thrash Northern Ireland 5-1 in Belfast in the UEFA Nations League.
FRANCE: Forward Kylian Mbappe tests positive for coronavirus, just two days after scoring the winning goal against Sweden in the UEFA Nations League.

Tuesday September 8

CONCACAF: A late decision is made to postpone the CONCACAF 2022 World Cup qualifiers, scheduled for October and November, until March 2021.
PORTUGAL: Cristiano Ronaldo becomes the first European male footballer to hit a century of international goals.

Defender... Abdelkarim Hassan

The duo [Afif and Hassan] were expected to return to Europe soon after the Asian Cup finished, but that has not been the case

All is not quite lost, as the pair will be working with one of the best European players in the modern era in Doha. In July, Xavi decided not to go to Barcelona and extended his contract as Al Sadd head coach for another year. The former midfield maestro has high hopes for Akram.

"With this kind of talent, he has many ambitions," Xavi said. "He's still young and I think he can do many things in his career."

And then there is Almoez Ali. The Sudanese-born striker who had early spells in Austria and Spain, grabbed nine goals in the 2019 Asian Cup triumph. That tournament record led to rumours of Juventus and Tottenham Hotspur interest but instead, the 24-year-old has been playing in Qatar for the past four years with Al Duhail. At the moment, Ali, who scored against Paraguay to help Qatar pick up their only point at the 2019 Copa America, doesn't look like moving, which is a surprise as he looked to be a genuine star in the making and well capable of playing at a higher level.

Goalscorer...Almoez Ali

It remains to be seen if playing in the Qatar Stars League has Ali where he wants to be when the 2022 World Cup comes around – and the same can be said for all of The Maroons. At the moment, the entire squad is based at home. The league is improving but a bit more European experience would not go amiss.

Xavi believes that Qatar will be OK. "I think they are working really well," the Spaniard said. "They have a very good team, also a very good coach and they are very well organised on the pitch. They have a very, very good generation of young players, not only Akram – he's one of the best – but also Almoez Ali and Boualem Khoukhi."

Time will tell if Xavi is right and whether Qatar will regret not having more players in the big leagues two years from now.

COLOMBIA: After almost six months of hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic, football in Colombia returns with the first leg of the Super League final between Junior and America de Cali in Barranquilla.
ITALY: Italy and Roma midfielder Nicolo Zaniolo suffers a second serious knee injury after only just overcoming an ACL tear in his other knee. Meanwhile, the Rome club sells left-back Aleksandar Kolarov to Inter.
ENGLAND: Kevin De Bruyne adds the 2019-20 PFA Player of the Year award to his Premier League gong.
GERMANY: Bundesliga outfit RB Leipzig re-sign Manchester City full-back Angelino on loan for another season.

Wednesday September 9

USA: A report from *The Athletic* reveals that MLS side Houston Dynamo are weighing up a potential rebrand that could include changes to their crest, team colours and team name.
IRAQ: The Iraqi Football Association announces that the 2020-21 season will kick-off in October.

Thursday September 10

JAPAN: Japanese women's football superstar Yuki Nagasato joins Hayabusa Eleven – an amateur men's team from Kanagawa Prefecture – on loan from Chicago Red Stars.
FRANCE: A PSG side, severely depleted due to positive COVID-19 cases, loses 1-0 away to newly-promoted Lens.
ENGLAND: Fulham snap up Netherlands defender Kenny Tete from Lyon and loan out keeper Marcus Bettinelli to Championship club Middlesbrough.

Friday September 11

ENGLAND: Leeds United boss Marcelo Bielsa signs a new one-year deal with the club.

Internationals

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Sep 4 - Florence
Italy 1 (Sensi 68)
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Dzeko 90+1)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sidiropoulos (Gre)
Italy: Donnarumma - Florenzi, Bonucci, Acerbi, Biraghi, L. Pellegrini (Kean 86), Sensi, Barella, Chiesa (Zaniolo 71), Belotti (Immobile 73), Insigne.
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Sehic - Cipetic, Sunjic, Sanicanin, Kolasinac (Civic 84), Cimirot, Hadziahmetovic, Gojak, Visca (Milosevic 86), Dzeko, Hodzic (Besic 77).

Sep 4 - Amsterdam
Netherlands 1 (Bergwijn 62)
Poland 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Kabakov (Bul)
Netherlands: Cillessen - Hateboer, Veltman, Van Dijk, Ake, De Roon, Wijnaldum, F. De Jong, Bergwijn (Van de Beek 74), Depay, Promes (L. De Jong 90+2).
Poland: Szczesny - Kedziora, Glik, Bednarek, Bereszynski, Klich, Krychowiak, S. Szymanski, Zielinski (Moder 77), Jozwiak (Grosicki 71), Piatek (Milik 63).

Sep 7 - Zenica
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Hajradinovic 25 pen)
Poland 2 (Glik 45+1, Grosicki 68)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Cakir (Tur)
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Begovic - Kvrzic, Bicakcic, Sanicanin, Civic (Milosevic 82), Hadziahmetovic, Besic (Dzeko 60), Hajradinovic, Hodzic, Koljic, Gojak (Visca 46).
Poland: Fabianski - Kedziora, Glik, Bednarek, Rybus, Goralski, Krychowiak (Klich 68), Jozwiak, Zielinski (Linetty 85), Grosicki (S. Szymanski 80), Milik.

Sep 7 - Amsterdam
Netherlands 0
Italy 1 (Barella 45+2)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Brych (Ger)
Netherlands: Cillessen - Hateboer (Dumfries 70), Veltman, Van Dijk, Ake (L. De Jong 81), De Roon, Van de Beek (Bergwijn 57), F. De Jong, Wijnaldum, Depay, Promes.
Italy: Donnarumma - D'Ambrosio, Bonucci, Chiellini, Spinazzola, Barella, Jorginho, Locatelli (Cristante 81), Zaniolo (Kean 42), Immobile, Insigne (Chiesa 90).

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP A1

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Italy	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Netherlands	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Poland	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Bosnia & Herz.	2	0	1	1	2	3	1

Sep 5 - Copenhagen
Denmark 0
Belgium 2 (Denayer 10, Mertens 77)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Scharer (Sui)
Denmark: Schmeichel - Wass (M. Jorgensen 83), A. Christensen, Kjaer, Skov, Delaney, Hojbjerg, Eriksen, Y. Poulsen, Dolberg (Cornelius 83), Braithwaite (Maehle 72).
Belgium: Mignolet - Castagne, Alderweireld, Denayer, Vertonghen, Tielemans (Doku 88), Witsel, Carrasco (Praet 57), Mertens (Trossard 80), Lukaku, T. Hazard.

Sep 5 - Reykjavik
Iceland 0
England 1 (Sterling 90+2 pen)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Jovanovic (Srb)
Iceland: Halldorsson - Hermansson, Ingason, Arnason, H. Magnusson, Traustason (Hallfredsson 76), B. Bjarnason, Palsson, Thorsteinsson (Sigurdsson 66), Gudmundsson, Bodvarsson (H. Fridjonsson 90+1). *Sent off: Ingason 89.*
England: Pickford - Walker, Gomez, Dier, Trippier, Ward-Prowse, Rice, Foden (Ings 68), Sancho (Alexander-Arnold 73), Kane (Greenwood 78), Sterling. *Sent off: Walker 70.*

Sep 8 - Brussels
Belgium 5 (Witsel 14, Batshuayi 18, 70, Mertens 51, Doku 80)
Iceland 1 (H. Fridjonsson 11)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Raczkowski (Pol)
Belgium: Casteels (Mignolet 55) - Meunier, Alderweireld, Denayer, Vertonghen, De Bruyne (Vanaken 80), Witsel, T. Hazard (Verschaeren 65), Mertens, Batshuayi, Doku.
Iceland: Kristinsson - Hermansson, Eyjolfsson, Fjoluson, Skulason, Sigurdsson (Anderson 72), Baldursson (Hallfredsson 54), Palsson, B. Bjarnason, Gudmundsson, H. Fridjonsson (Bodvarsson 70).

Sep 8 - Copenhagen
Denmark 0
England 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Kovacs (Rou)
Denmark: Schmeichel - Wass, M. Jorgensen, A. Christensen, Skov, Delaney, Norgaard (Hojbjerg 73), Eriksen, Y. Poulsen, Dolberg (Falk 76), Braithwaite (Kjaer 83).
England: Pickford - Alexander-Arnold (Maitland-Niles 87), Gomez, Coady, Dier, Trippier, Phillips (Grealish 76), Rice, Sancho (Mount 60), Kane, Sterling.

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP A2

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Belgium	2	2	0	0	7	1	6
England	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Denmark	2	0	1	1	0	2	1
Iceland	2	0	0	2	1	6	0

Sep 5 - Porto
Portugal 4 (Joao Cancelo 42, Diogo Jota 59, Joao Felix 71, Andre Silva 90+4)
Croatia 1 (Petkovic 90+2)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Massa (Ita)
Portugal: Anthony Lopes - Joao Cancelo, Pepe, Ruben Dias, Raphael Guerreiro, Joao Moutinho (Sergio Oliveira 82), Danilo, Bruno Fernandes, Diogo Jota, Joao Felix (Andre Silva 88), Bernardo Silva (Trincao 78).
Croatia: Livakovic - Jedvaj, Lovren, Vida, Barisic, Pasalic (Brozovic 61), Kovacic, Brekalo (Perisic 61), Vlasic, Rebic, Kramaric (Petkovic 74).

Sep 5 - Solna
Sweden 0
France 1 (Mbappe 41)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Marciniak (Pol)
Sweden: Olsen - Lustig, Jansson, Lindelof, Bengtsson (Sema 88), S. Larsson (Kulusevski 70), Olsson, Ekdal, Forsberg, Quaison (Guidetti 77), Berg.
France: Lloris - Dubois (F. Mendy 88), Upamecano, Varane, Kimpembe, Digne, Rabiot, Kante, Griezmann, Mbappe (Martial 77), Giroud (Nzonzi 90+2).

Sep 8 - Paris
France 4 (Griezmann 44, Livakovic 45+2 OG, Upamecano 66, Giroud 78 pen)
Croatia 2 (Lovren 18, Brekalo 56)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Hategan (Rou)
France: Lloris - Upamecano, Lenglet, L. Hernandez, Sissoko, Kante (Camavinga 63), Nzonzi, F. Mendy, Griezmann (Fekir 78), Ben Yedder (Giroud 63), Martial.
Croatia: Livakovic - Uremovic (Vida 57), Lovren, Caleta-Car, Melnjak, Brozovic, Kovacic, Rebic (Brekalo 46), Vlasic, Perisic (Pasalic 66), Kramaric.

Sep 8 - Solna
Sweden 0
Portugal 2 (Ronaldo 45+2, 73)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Makkelie (Ned)
Sweden: Olsen - Krafth, Helander, Jansson, Augustinsson, Kulusevski (Ekdal 90), Olsson, Svensson, Forsberg (Svanberg 79), Isak (Quaison 71), Berg. *Sent off: Svensson 44.*
Portugal: Anthony Lopes - Joao Cancelo, Pepe, Ruben Dias, Raphael Guerreiro, Joao Moutinho (Ruben Neves 73), Danilo, Bruno Fernandes, Ronaldo (Diogo Jota 81), Joao Felix, Bernardo Silva (Guedes 22).

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP A3

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Portugal	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
France	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
Sweden	2	0	0	2	0	3	0
Croatia	2	0	0	2	3	8	0

Sep 3 - Stuttgart
Germany 1 (Werner 52)
Spain 1 (Gaya 90+7)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Orsata (Ita)
Germany: Trapp - Kehrer, Rudiger, Can, Sule, Gosens, Gundogan (Serdar 74), Kroos, Draxler, Werner (Koch 90+1), Sane (Ginter 63).
Spain: De Gea - Carvajal, Ramos, Pau Torres, Gaya, Thiago, Busquets (Mikel Merino 57), Fabian (Oscar 80), Navas (Fati 46), Rodrigo, F. Torres.

Sep 3 - Lviv
Ukraine 2 (Yarmolenko 15, Zinchenko 69)
Switzerland 1 (Seferovic 42)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Ekberg (Swe)
Ukraine: Pyatov - Tymchyk, Kryvtsov, Matviyenko, Mykhaylichenko, Malinovskyi, Stepanenko, Zinchenko, Yarmolenko, Konoplyanka (Yaremchuk 54), Junior Moraes.
Switzerland: Sommer - Mbabu, Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez, Zuber (Steffen 46), Sow (Aebischer 82), Xhaka, Vargas (Ajeti 73), Embolo, Seferovic.

Sep 6 - Madrid
Spain 4 (Ramos 4 pen, 30 Fati 33, F. Torres 85)
Ukraine 0
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Bastien (Fra)
Spain: De Gea - Navas, Ramos (Garcia 61), Pau Torres, Reguilon, Olmo, Thiago, Rodri (Oscar 69), Mikel Merino, Fati, Gerard Moreno (F. Torres 74).
Ukraine: Pyatov - Tymchyk, Kryvtsov, Matviyenko, Mykhaylichenko, Malinovskyi, Kharatin (Sydorchuk 63), Zinchenko, Yarmolenko (Kovalenko 79), Yaremchuk, Marlos (Tsygankov 56).

Sep 6 - Basle
Switzerland 1 (Widmer 59)
Germany 1 (Gundogan 15)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Oliver (Eng)
Switzerland: Sommer - Widmer, Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez (Zuber 64), Benito, Sow (Aebischer 80), Xhaka, Steffen, Embolo (Vargas 72), Seferovic.
Germany: Leno - Kehrer, Ginter, Sule (Tah 62), Rudiger, Gosens (Can 78), Gundogan, Kroos, Draxler, Werner, Sane (Brandt 46).

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP A4

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Spain	2	1	1	0	5	1	4
Ukraine	2	1	0	1	2	5	3
Germany	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Switzerland	2	0	1	1	2	3	1

Sep 4 - Oslo
Norway 1 (Haaland 67)
Austria 2 (Gregoritsch 36, Sabitzer 55 pen)

Sep 4 - Bucharest
Romania 1 (Puscas 6)
Northern Ireland 1 (Whyte 87)
Northern Ireland: *Sent off: Magennis 39.*

Sep 7 - Klagenfurt
Austria 2 (Baumgartner 18, Onisiwo 82)
Romania 3 (Alibec 4, Grigore 52, Maxim 71)

Sep 7 - Belfast
Northern Ireland 1 (McNair 7)
Norway 5 (Elyounoussi 3, Haaland 8, 59, Sorloth 20, 48)

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP B1

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Romania	2	1	1	0	4	3	4
Austria	2	1	0	1	4	4	3
Norway	2	1	0	1	6	3	3
N. Ireland	2	0	1	1	2	6	1

Sep 4 - Glasgow
Scotland 1 (Christie 45+1 pen)
Israel 1 (Zahavi 74)

Sep 4 - Bratislava
Slovakia 1 (Schranz 89)
Czech Republic 3 (Coufal 49, Dockal 54 pen, Krmencik 87)

Sep 7 - Olomouc
Czech Republic 1 (Pesek 13)
Scotland 2 (Dykes 28, Christie 53 pen)

Sep 7 - Netanya
Israel 1 (Elmkies 90+2)
Slovakia 1 (Duris 15)

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP B2

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Scotland	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Czech Republic	2	1	0	1	4	3	3
Israel	2	0	2	0	2	2	2
Slovakia	2	0	0	2	2	4	1

Sep 3 - Moscow
Russia 3 (Dzyuba 49 pen, 82, Karavaev 70)
Serbia 1 (A. Mitrovic 79)

Sep 3 - Sivas
Turkey 0
Hungary 1 (Szoboszlai 81)

Sep 6 - Budapest
Hungary 2 (Sallai 63, Nikolic 71)
Russia 3 (An. Miranchuk 16, Ozdoev 35, Mario Fernandes 47)

Sep 6 - Belgrade
Serbia 0
Turkey 0
Serbia: *Sent off: Kolarov 49.*

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP B3

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Russia	2	2	0	0	6	3	6
Hungary	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Turkey	2	0	1	1	0	1	1
Serbia	2	0	1	1	1	3	1

Sep 3 - Sofia
Bulgaria 1 (Kraev 57)
Republic of Ireland 1 (Duffy 90+4)

Sep 3 - Helsinki
Finland 0
Wales 1 (Moore 81)

Sep 6 - Dublin
Republic of Ireland 0
Finland 1 (Jensen 65)

Sep 6 - Cardiff
Wales 1 (N. Williams 90+5)
Bulgaria 0

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP B4

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wales	2	2	0	0	2	0	6
Finland	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Rep. of Ireland	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
Bulgaria	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

Sep 5 - Baku
Azerbaijan 1 (Sheydaev 44)
Luxembourg 2 (Krivotsyuk 49 OG, Rodrigues 73 pen)
Azerbaijan: *Sent off: Emreli 25.*

Sep 5 - Nicosia
Cyprus 0
Montenegro 2 (Jovetic 61, 74)

Sep 8 - Nicosia
Cyprus 0
Azerbaijan 1 (Medvedev 30)

Sep 8 - Luxembourg
Luxembourg 0
Montenegro 1 (Beciraj 90+4)
Luxembourg: *Sent off: Martins 84.*

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP C1

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Montenegro	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Luxembourg	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Azerbaijan	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Cyprus	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Sep 5 - Tallinn
Estonia 0
Georgia 1 (Kacharava 33)

Sep 5 - Skopje
North Macedonia 2 (Alioski 6 pen, Nestrovski 39 pen)
Armenia 1 (Barseghyan 90+5)

Sep 8 - Yerevan
Armenia 2 (Karapetyan 44, Wbeymar 66)
Estonia 0

Sep 8 - Tbilisi
Georgia 1 (Okriashvili 14 pen)
North Macedonia 1 (Ristovski 34)
North Macedonia: *Sent off: Musliu 64.*

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP C2	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
N. Macedonia	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Georgia	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Armenia	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Estonia	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Sep 3 - Parma
Moldova 1 (Nicolaescu 21)
Kosovo 1 (Kololli 72)

Sep 3 - Ljubljana
Slovenia 0
Greece 0

Sep 6 - Pristina
Kosovo 1 (B. Berisha 83)
Greece 2 (Limnios 3, Siovas 52)

Sep 6 - Ljubljana
Slovenia 1 (Bohar 29)
Moldova 0

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP C3	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Greece	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Slovenia	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Kosovo	2	0	1	1	2	3	1
Moldova	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

Sep 4 - Minsk
Belarus 0
Albania 2 (Cikalleshi 24, Bare 79)

Sep 4 - Vilnius
Lithuania 0
Kazakhstan 2 (Zainutdinov 4, Kuat 87)

Sep 7 - Tirana
Albania 0
Lithuania 1 (Kazlauskas 52)

Sep 7 - Almaty
Kazakhstan 1 (Aimbetov 63)
Belarus 2 (Bordachev 54, Lisakovich 87)

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP C4	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kazakhstan	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Albania	2	1	0	1	2	1	3
Belarus	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Lithuania	2	1	0	1	1	2	3

Sep 3 - Torshavn
Faroe Islands 3 (K. Olsen 26, A. Olsen 88, Hendriksson 90+1)
Malta 2 (Degabriele 38, Agius 74)

Sep 3 - Riga
Latvia 0
Andorra 0
Latvia: *Sent off: Gutkovskis 71.*

Sep 6 – Andorra la Vella
Andorra 0
Faroe Islands 1 (K. Olsen 32)

Sep 6 – Ta'Qali
Malta 1 (Nwoko 16)
Latvia 1 (Guillaumier 26 OG)

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP D1	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Faroe Islands	2	2	0	0	2	0	6
Latvia	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Malta	2	0	1	1	3	4	1
Andorra	2	0	1	1	0	1	1

Sep 5 - Gibraltar
Gibraltar 1 (Torrilla 43)
San Marino 0

Sep 8 - Rimini
San Marino 0
Liechtenstein 2 (Hasler 4 pen, Frick 15)

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE GROUP D2	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liechtenstein	1	1	0	0	2	0	3
Gibraltar	1	1	0	0	1	0	3
San Marino	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Club football

All concluded league tables from 2019-2020. Champions (C), relegated (R) and if null and void, no (C) and (R) included.

AFRICA

SOUTH AFRICA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mamelodi Sun (C)	30	17	8	5	43	22	59
Kaizer Chiefs	30	17	6	7	48	27	57
Orlando Pirates	30	14	10	6	40	29	52
Bidvest Wits	30	14	10	6	33	22	52
SuperSport United	30	14	8	8	43	26	50
Cape Town City	30	11	9	10	40	37	42
Maritzburg United	30	10	12	8	29	27	42
Bloemfontein Celtic	30	9	12	9	43	39	39
Highlands Park	30	9	12	9	31	35	39
Stellenbosch	30	9	9	12	26	34	36
Chippa United	30	8	10	12	18	26	34
Golden Arrows	30	8	10	12	23	35	34
AmaZulu	30	7	9	14	20	33	30
Baroka	30	7	8	15	19	28	29
Black Leopards*	30	8	5	17	27	44	29
Polokwane City (R)	30	7	4	19	25	44	25

**Black Leopards enter the relegation play-offs with National First Division sides Ajax Cape Town and Tshakhuma Tsha Madzivhandila.*

TUNISIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Esperance (C)	25	18	7	0	41	12	61
CS Sfaxien	25	15	5	5	31	17	50
Monastir	25	12	8	5	35	18	44
Etoile du Sahel	25	11	7	7	34	23	40
Club Africain*	25	13	7	5	26	11	40
Stade Tunisien	25	9	6	10	24	27	33
Ben Guerdane	25	8	9	8	25	30	33
Chebba	25	7	8	10	31	31	29
Soliman	25	8	4	13	28	29	28
Tataouine	25	5	10	10	20	28	25
Bizertin	25	5	8	12	18	34	23
Metlaoui	25	5	7	13	20	33	22
Hammam-Lif (R)	25	5	7	13	20	38	22
Kairouan (R)	25	6	3	16	19	41	21

**Club Africain were deducted six points.*

ASIA

IRAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Persepolis (C)	30	21	4	5	46	17	67
Esteghlal	30	14	11	5	55	31	53
Foolad	30	14	9	7	28	19	51
Tractor	30	14	8	8	31	23	50
Sepahan	30	12	13	5	39	22	49
Shahr Khodrou	30	12	10	8	27	25	46
Sanat Naft	30	11	8	11	29	33	41
Naft Masjed Sol	30	7	17	6	24	22	38
Nassaji Mazan	30	8	14	8	30	32	38
Gol Gohar	30	7	12	11	27	34	33
Machine Sazi	30	8	7	15	28	40	31
Zob Ahan	30	7	9	14	31	39	30
Paykan	30	6	11	13	38	44	29
Saipa	30	5	14	11	24	35	29
Pars Jonoubi J (R)	30	4	15	11	20	30	27
Shahin Bushehr (R)	30	4	10	16	26	57	22

SAUDI ARABIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal (C)	30	22	6	2	74	26	72
Al Nassr	30	19	7	4	60	26	64
Al Ahli	30	15	5	10	49	36	50
Al Wahda	30	16	1	13	45	40	49
Al Faisaly	30	14	6	10	41	36	48
Al Raed	30	13	7	10	41	50	46
Al Shabab	30	12	7	11	38	37	43
Al Ittifaq	30	13	3	14	46	38	42
Abha	30	11	5	14	41	52	38
Damak	30	9	8	13	37	52	35
Al Ittihad	30	9	8	13	42	41	35
Al Taawon	30	10	5	15	33	40	35
Al Fateh	30	8	9	13	42	49	33
Al Feiha (R)	30	8	8	14	34	44	32
Al Hazm (R)	30	7	6	17	40	61	27
Al Adalah (R)	30	4	9	17	27	62	21

QATAR

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Duhail (C)	22	16	4	2	38	16	52
Al Rayyan	22	15	6	1	40	15	51
Al Sadd	22	14	3	5	51	29	45
Al Gharafa	22	10	6	6	34	29	36
Al Sailiya	22	8	5	9	22	25	29
Al Wakrah	22	7	6	9	28	31	27
Al Arabi	22	6	8	8	28	28	26
Qatar SC	22	4	8	10	18	26	20
Al Ahli	22	5	5	12	24	36	20
Umm Salal	22	3	9	10	18	37	18
Al Khor*	22	3	8	11	25	35	17
Al Shahaniya (R)	22	2	10	10	24	43	16

**Al Khor beat Qatari Second Division's Al Markhiya 2-0 in the relegation play-off.*

AUSTRALIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sydney FC (C)	26	16	5	5	49	25	53
Melbourne City	26	14	5	7	49	37	47
Wellington Phoenix	26	12	5	9	38	33	41
Brisbane Roar	26	11	7	8	29	28	40
Western United	26	12	3	11	46	37	39
Perth Glory	26	10	7	9	43	36	37
Adelaide United	26	11	3	12	44	49	36
Newcastle Jets	26	9	7	10	32	40	34
Western Sydney W	26	9	6	11	35	40	33
Melbourne Victory	26	6	5	15	33	44	23
Central Coast M	26	5	3	18	26	55	18

Final Series

Elimination Finals
Aug 22: Wellington Phoenix 0 Perth Glory 1; Brisbane Roar 0 Western United 1

Semi-Finals
Aug 26: Melbourne City 2 Western United 0; Sydney FC 2 Perth Glory 0

Final
Aug 30: Sydney FC 1 Melbourne City 0

EUROPE

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2020-21

Preliminary Qualifying Round
Aug 8: Tre Fiori (Smr) 0 Linfield (Nir) 2; Drita (Kvx) 2 Inter Club d'Escaldes (And) 1
Aug 11: Drita 0 Linfield 3 (*awarded*)

First Qualifying Round
Aug 18: Celtic (Sco) 6 KR (Isl) 0; Legia Warsaw (Pol) 1 Linfield 0; Red Star Belgrade (Sbr) 5 Europa (Gib) 0; Qarabag (Aze) 4 Sileks (Mkd) 0; Dinamo Brest (Blr) 6 Astana (Kaz) 3
Aug 19: Ferencvaros (Hun) 2 Djurgardens (Swe) 0; Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda) 2 Fola Esch (Lux) 0; Connah's Quay Nomads (Wal) 0 Sarajevo (Bih) 2; Buducnost Podgorica (Mne) 1 Ludogorets (Bul) 3; Ararat-Armenia (Arm) 0 Omonia (Cyp) 1 (*aet*); Floriana (Mlt) 0 Cluj (Rou) 2; Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 2 Riga (Lva) 0; Dinamo Tbilisi (Geo) 0 Tirana (Alb) 2; Molde (Nor) 5 KuPS (Fin) 0; Flora (Est) 1 Suduva (Ltu) 1(p) (*aet*); Celje (Svn) 3 Dundalk (Irl) 0
Aug 21: KI (Fro) 3 Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 0 (*awarded*)

Second Qualifying Round
Aug 25: Tirana 0 Red Star Belgrade 1; PAOK (Gre) 3 Besiktas (Tur) 1
Aug 26: Cluj 2 Dinamo Zabreg (Cro) 2(p) (*aet*); Young Boys (Sui) 3 KI 1; Celtic 1 Ferencvaros 2; Suduva 0 Maccabi Tel Aviv 3; Legia Warsaw 0 Omonia 2 (*aet*); Celje 1 Molde 2; Ludogorets 0 Midtjylland (Den) 1; Dinamo Brest 2 Sarajevo 1; Qarabag 2 Sheriff Tiraspol 1; AZ (Ned) 3 Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (*aet*); Lokomotiva (Cro) 0 Rapid Vienna (Aut) 1

Third Qualifying Round
Sep 15: PAOK 2 Benfica (Por) 1; Dynamo Kiev (Ukr) 2 AZ 0; Gent (Bel) 2 Rapid Vienna 1
Sep 16: Omonia 1(p) Red Star Belgrade 1 (*aet*); Ferencvaros 2 Dinamo Zagreb 1; Qarabag 0 Molde 0(p) (*aet*); Maccabi Tel Aviv 1 Dinamo Brest 0; Midtjylland 3 Young Boys 0

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GROUP EDITOR
Stephen Fishlock

ASSISTANT EDITORS
Jamie Evans & Jared Tinslay

STAFF WRITER
Sam Straw

DESIGN
Sean Phillips & Calum Booth, atg-media.com

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EDITORIAL
Kelsey Media, The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill, Yalding, Maidstone, Kent, ME18 6AL

ADVERTISING AND SPONSORSHIP
Talk Media Sales: David Lerpiniere
Tel: 01732 445325
Email: david.lerpiniere@talkmediasales.co.uk

CHIEF EXECUTIVE Steve Wright
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER Phil Weeden
MANAGING DIRECTOR Kevin McCormick
SUBS MARKETING DIRECTOR Gill Lambert
RETAIL DIRECTOR Steve Brown
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Intimidating atmosphere... Hosting a Turkish Cup final between Galatasaray and Fenerbahce back in 2005

ATATURK OLYMPIC STADIUM

Location: Istanbul, Turkey
Team: N/A
Built: 2002
Capacity: 75,145

Due to host the 2020 final before COVID-19 struck, the Ataturk Olympic Stadium will finally get the chance to host its second Champions League final in May 2021.

Situated on the outskirts of Istanbul, the five-star sports complex is named after Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder and first president of the Republic of Turkey, and was built for Turkey's failed bid for the 2008 Olympic Games at a cost of $140 million.

Certified by World Athletics and the International Olympic Committee as a first-class venue for track and field, it is the largest-capacity stadium in Turkey and hosts a number of the national team's fixtures. Besiktas were the most recent Super Lig club to use the arena while their own stadium, Vodafone Park, was under construction during the 2015-16 campaign, while it has also been the temporary home of Istanbul Basaksehir, Galatasaray and Kasimpasa.

Unique...View from outside the ground

Trouble...Besiktas fans clash with police during a game v Galatasaray

Glory...Scene of Liverpool's amazing 2005 CL triumph

GREATEST GAMES

2002 July 31 Galatasaray 2-0 Olympiakos

The stadium hosted its first game on July 31, 2002, as Galatasaray played Olympiakos in a friendly in front of a record 79,414 crowd. More than just a regular friendly, it was part of a launched bid from Turkey and Greece to host Euro 2008 together, in spite of their fractious history.

2005 May 25 Milan 3-3 (P) Liverpool

Probably the most famous Champions League final of all time. An early strike from Paolo Maldini and a brace from Hernan Crespo were cancelled out in the second half by three goals in just six minutes, scored by Steven Gerrard, Vladimir Smicer and Xabi Alonso, before goalkeeping heroics from Jerzy Dudek in the penalty shoot-out.

2013 September 22 Besiktas 0-3 Galatasaray

The first game between these two Istanbul giants in 2013-14 took place at the Ataturk as Besiktas awaited the construction of their new ground. Ex-Chelsea striker Didier Drogba struck twice as Gala secured a comfortable win in front of a 77,512-strong crowd, the stadium's second-highest ever attendance.

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